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SEPTEMBER 2022

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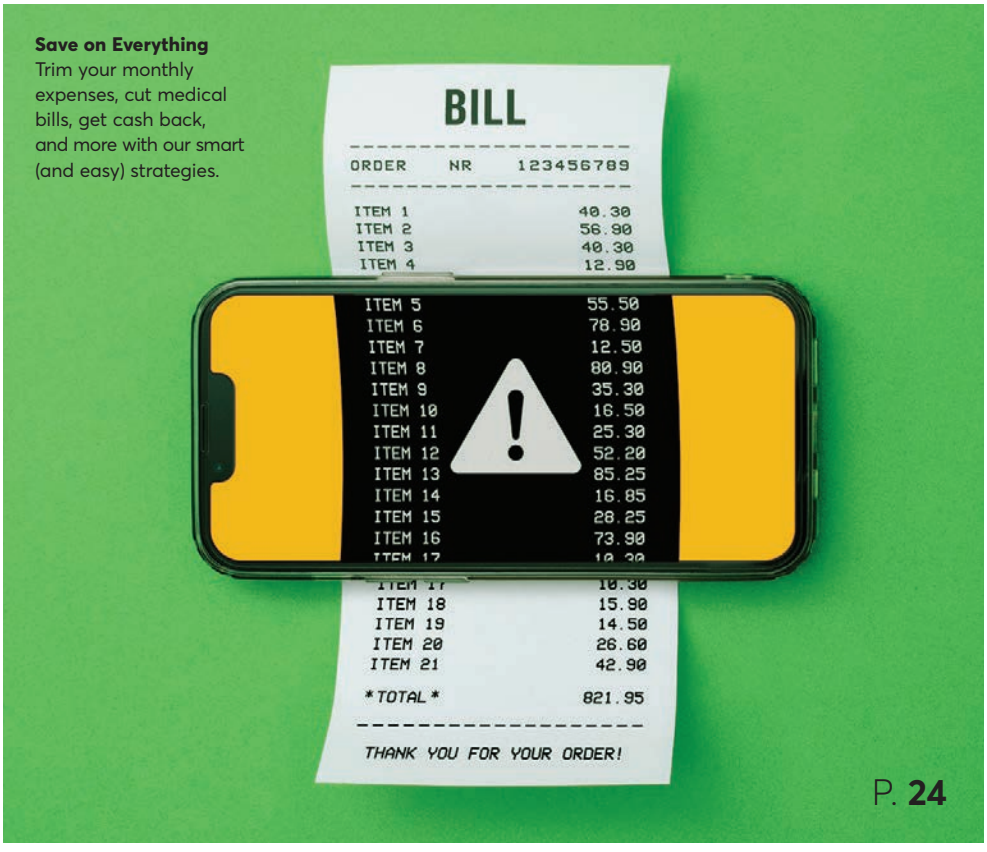

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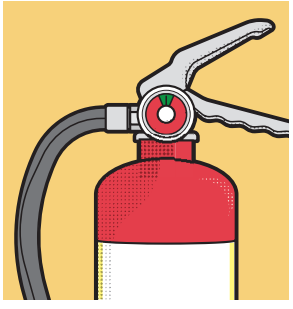

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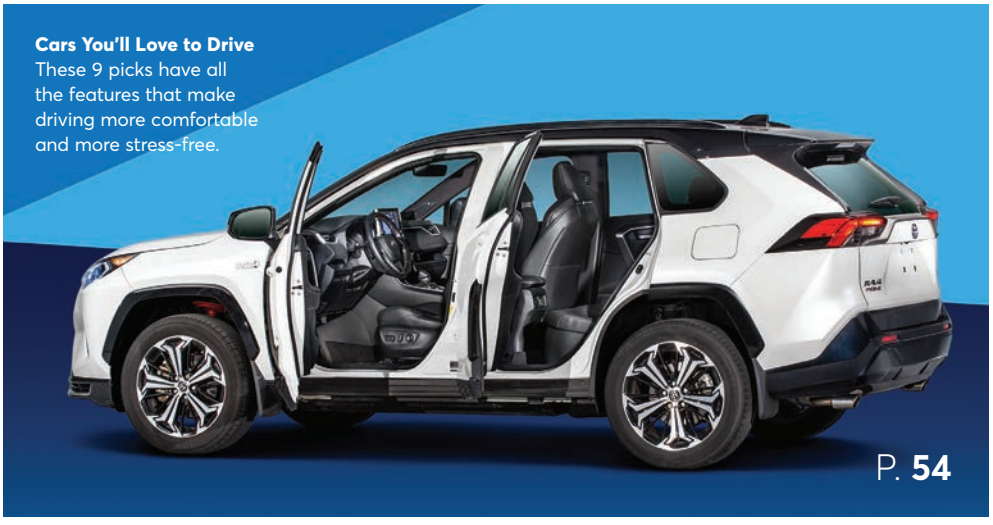

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Why We Need Competition

ACROSS THE COUNTRY, Americans are looking at grocery bills, watching gas prices tick up—and wincing. Skyrocketing costs for food, fuel, housing, and travel make it hard to forget inflation is the highest it has been since the 1980s.

Inflation is clearly weighing on your minds: A nationally representative CR survey of 2,076 U.S. adults this past May found that 85 percent are at least moderately concerned about higher prices, and just over half said they're more cautious in their spending habits than they were six months ago.

The ongoing debate over the cause of our current inflation might not offer solace—but it has led to overdue recognition that competition matters to the economy and to consumers.

Take this year's baby formula crisis. Parents scrambled to buy formula amid a shortage exacerbated by a recall and factory closure. The crisis spotlighted a troubling truth: Four companies control about 90 percent of the U.S. baby formula supply. That concentration means higher costs and more risk for consumers when recalls and shortages take even a few brands out of commission.

It's not just one industry—from Big Tech to agriculture, broadband to healthcare, consolidation is limiting consumer choice across the economy. Taking that on is a daunting task, but there are things you can do to navigate this environment. Our cover story, "How to Save Money Now," shows how to cut costs on everything from monthly utility charges and groceries to medical bills. But to help create a fair, competitive economy, we need a strong, consumer-powered movement to demand that change.

My upcoming book, "Buyer Aware," shines a light on how consumers, business, and government can work together to build a marketplace that serves everyone. It includes step-by-step advice on growing your power in the marketplace. To learn more, go to **buyeraware.cr.org**.

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PHOTO: VICTORIA WILL

Making Cars Safer for All

Women have far greater odds than men of being seriously injured in a car crash, even when everyone is wearing a seat belt. One reason, many experts believe, is the lack of crash-test dummies made to represent female bodies—resulting in safety designs and systems that tend to be better suited to protecting the average (5-foot-9-inch, 170-pound) male body in the 1970s. So CR is now urging the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) to require the use of female crash-test dummies in safety testing.

This effort is one part of a broader CR campaign to encourage NHTSA to thoroughly update its New Car Assessment Program (NCAP). For decades, NCAP has given consumers the safety data they need to make smart buying decisions, and created incentives for automakers to equip more vehicles with the latest life-saving technologies.

But the program has fallen behind the times: Almost all vehicles now receive four- or five-star safety ratings, making it hard for consumers to differentiate the safest cars from the rest, and limiting the need for automakers to compete to make their cars safer.

A seat belt-wearing female has

73%

greater odds than a seat belt-wearing male of being seriously injured in a car crash of the same type and severity.

Source: The Journal Traffic Injury Prevention

Join us in calling on NHTSA to develop a new "female" crash-test dummy—and, more broadly, protocols that are up-to-date and make everyone safer—at **CR.org/crashdummies.** Meanwhile, you can learn more about how to protect yourself and your family while driving, at **CR.org/autosafetyguide.**

CR ACTION UPDATE

In June, New York governor Kathy Hochul signed a CR-backed bill requiring companies that sell tickets to concert, sporting, and other events to disclose all fees and service charges up front. Such fees, often disclosed late in the purchase process, typically increase the price of a ticket by 20 to 30 percent. The law—the first of its kind in the nation—also requires resale tickets to be clearly labeled as such, along with the original price. And it strengthens penalties for using "bot" software to purchase tickets in bulk at lightning speeds and then reselling them at inflated prices.

Keeping PFAS Out of Water

WHAT'S AT STAKE

Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, or PFAS, are nearly everywhere in the consumer landscape. Known as "forever chemicals" because they're slow to break down, PFAS are found in carpets, outdoor gear, and water- and grease-proof products like food packaging and nonstick cookware. Their manufacture and disposal contaminates soil, air, and water. Worse, PFAS exposure is linked to a growing list of health problems, including immune system suppression and a higher risk of some cancers.

HOW CR HAS YOUR BACK

Recent CR investigations (some with the Guardian U.S. news organization) have exposed widespread PFAS contamination of U.S. drinking water and the presence of PFAS in the packaging of many U.S. food chains and grocery stores. And we've been pressuring policymakers to protect consumers from these and other PFAS sources.

In June, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency issued strict new health advisories for drinking water, dramatically reducing the level that it considers "safe" for certain PFAS. Though the agency addressed only four of thousands of known PFAS, CR advocates consider this an important first step.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Read CR's advice on how to limit your exposure to PFAS, at **CR.org/pfastips.** Join us in urging Congress to ban PFAS in food packaging, at **CR.org/pfaswrappers.** And tell your senator to support legislation–already backed by the House and the White House–setting a federal drinking water standard for toxic chemicals, at **CR.org/pfaswater.**

ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN RITTER

Save More Waste Less
CR Consumer Reports
Save More Waste Less
LIVE A MORE SUSTAINABLE LIFE—AND CUT COSTS, TOO
OUR TOP-RATED SUNSCREENS
THE BEST CARS FOR BIG ROAD TRIPS
IMPORTANT NEWS ABOUT MILLS

Our July 2022 article **"Save More, Waste Less"** shared simple steps you can take to live more sustainably at home—and cut costs while you're at it. Our readers shared their own go-green-and-save strategies. To add your tips, head to **CR.org/savemore**.

WITH RESPECT TO the tip in "Save More, Waste Less" about how to use your dishwasher, I agree that prerinsing is unnecessary and wasteful. In my home, the hot water goes cold in the line. So it is necessary to run the hot water in the sink for a minute or two to flush out the cold water. Rather than let that water go down the drain needlessly, I use the prewash cycle of my dishwasher to flush the line. That way, when I start the wash cycle, the water is hot. This cold-water prewashing rinses the bulk of the food waste from my dishes. That also means I can use less detergent (good for my wallet and the environment), and my dishes come out extra clean!
–Phillip Ortiz, via CR.org

EDITOR'S NOTE *CR's appliance experts say there's a better way to solve the cold-water problem and use less water than a prewash cycle typically does. Just hand-wash and rinse the items that don't go into the dishwasher—certain pots and pans or knives, for example—before you turn on the dishwasher. You'll flush the cold water out of the hot-water supply so the dishwasher will get hot water from the start.*

ON PAGE 28 there is a list of strategies to reduce the summer A/C bill. Absent is the idea to avoid using your A/C during peak times, which are determined by utility companies. I have been able to reduce my electric bill significantly [by doing this]. Is there a thermostat that can coordinate with peak times and manage the usage to decrease power consumption during those peaks?
–Mike Hillis, Raleigh, NC

EDITOR'S NOTE *This is a valuable tip for anyone who has access to time-of-use (TOU) electric rates. A good option for a thermostat that can coordinate with TOU rates is an Ecobee model. It has a special feature that allows you to designate your home's energy provider and TOU rate. Unfortunately, the top Ecobee model in our ratings is being discontinued, and we haven't tested its replacement. The Ecobee 3 EB-STATe3-02 model is still available.*

THIS ISSUE HAD great suggestions for efficient, economical lawn care. I would—in the spirit of living a sustainable life—propose an evaluation of hand reel lawn mowers. For my small yard, I use an inexpensive model that is lightweight, makes little noise, has no cord to untangle or battery to replace, requires no fuel, and produces emissions only from my breathing as I stroll along. Maintenance amounts to simple cleaning, occasional lubes, and annual sharpening, and my lawn has never looked better.
–Dan Thompson-Aue, Forest Grove, OR

REGARDING YOUR REPORT "Installing a Charger for an EV? Think Ahead.": You state that switching away from fossil fuel is almost always good for the environment and often our bank accounts. I've been a CR member for many years and have never seen a cost analysis done to support that statement. Given the cost difference between an EV and a comparable ICE [internal combustion engine] vehicle, you're looking at around 12 years on the return on investment, even with gasoline at record highs.
–Paul Thibodeaux, Youngsville, LA

EDITOR'S NOTE *In 2020, CR analyzed the ownership costs of EVs on the market and found them to be comparable to the highest-rated and most popular gas-only vehicles in their class over a typical six-year*

WRITE

Go to CR.org/lettertoeditor to share your comments for publication.

ownership period–and $6,000 to $10,000 cheaper over their lifetime. Current longer-range electric vehicles (those with a range of over 200 miles) are expected to depreciate at rates similar to gas-only vehicles. EVs save you 60 percent on fuel and cost half as much to repair and maintain over their lifetime based on CR reliability surveys. And many EVs are eligible for federal, state, and (sometimes) utility company incentives, which can lower the purchase price. For details on this analysis, go to ***CR.org/evcosts.*** *For incentives on EVs in your area, go to* ***CR.org/evsavings.***

CHOOSING ORGANIC

IN "ORGANIC FOOD on a Budget" in the July 2022 issue, I was surprised that you did not mention the bigger picture. When we choose an organic vegetable or fruit, it isn't "all about me" and what it will do to our own health. We also are choosing to support the people who grow the produce. When we choose organic, we are choosing not to ingest [synthetic] pesticides. We are also choosing not to expose people who grow the produce to those same pesticides.
–Donna Wolcott, Raleigh, NC

EDITOR'S NOTE *You're right that pesticides do have a greater impact on people who work with them or live near agricultural areas. You can read about pesticides and farmworkers, as well as find our ratings for 35 fruits and vegetables based on pesticide harm and residue, at* ***CR.org/pesticides.***

JUMP-STARTING A HYBRID

IN THE JULY 2022 issue, "Tip From the Test Track" mentions using an EV's 12-volt battery to start another car. Does that hold true for a hybrid also? My Toyota Camry hybrid appears to have a conventional 12-volt battery.
–Anthony J. Sofia, Andover, MA

EDITOR'S NOTE *A hybrid can be jump-started or used to jump-start another battery just like any other car. Note that on a hybrid there are two batteries: a 12-volt battery plus a high-voltage drive battery that supplies propulsion power to the electric drive part of the hybrid system. An EV also has a 12-volt battery for accessories but not for the vehicle's propulsion. An EV will go into a reduced power mode when the drive battery is drained to almost empty (about 5 percent). To restore full power, you'll have to charge the EV's battery to get out of that mode.*

HOW LONG DOES SUNSCREEN STAY EFFECTIVE?

Good article on sunscreens [July 2022], but what about expiration dates? How long is a sunscreen viable?
—Ellen Brown, Saint Paul, MN

EDITOR'S NOTE *The Food and Drug Administration requires sunscreen to have an expiration date unless the manufacturer can show that the product will remain stable for at least three years. Even after you've opened the product, as long as you've stored it at room temperature, it should continue to be effective. But not all sunscreens are marked with an expiration date. If you can't recall when you bought yours, it's best to replace it. Regardless of the expiration date, if the sunscreen has separated, changed color, or has a funny smell, toss it.*

UPDATING YOUR WILL

I ENJOYED YOUR article on wills in the July 2022 issue. Giving copies of the important medical documents to those who need them in case of an emergency can easily be accomplished using the website MyDirectives. You can create and/or upload documents on the website as well as easily revise them at no cost.
–Alvin Arlitz, Clifton Park, NY

EDITOR'S NOTE *Services such as the one you mention can be convenient. Another option that we (and the other privacy experts we've consulted) advise is storing and sharing your sensitive documents using an encrypted password manager, like our top pick, 1Password. You can create a secure folder within the manager that you then share with the people who need access to your documents.*

FINDING SHOES THAT FIT

I READ WITH interest the article "How to Find More Comfortable Shoes" in the July 2022 issue. The length of the shoe is important, as you stated. But not stated is the width of the shoe. Some shoe companies make only one width–medium. What would occur if shirt companies made only one size? I'm retired now but put myself through college selling shoes. I was taught how to use a Brannock Device! The proper width is just as important as the length.
–Raymond Corum, Willows, CA

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What We're Testing in Our Labs ...

In our 63 labs, we continually review and rate products. Here, timely picks for this month.

Nonstick Frying Pans

WE TESTED: 39 models
WE TEST FOR: How evenly the surface heats up, how easily a fried egg slides off the pan's nonstick surface, how durable the nonstick coating is, and more.

ABOUT THE SCORES:
Median: 78
Range: 39-88

BEST OVERALL & OVEN-SAFE
GreenPan Reserve
$100

88 OVERALL SCORE

HOT DEAL & MOST DURABLE
GreenLife Soft Grips
$20

87 OVERALL SCORE

INDUCTION-COMPATIBLE
Le Creuset Toughened Pro
$110

87 OVERALL SCORE

All-Season Tires

WE TESTED: 26 all-season and performance all-season tires
WE TEST FOR: Performance during dry and wet braking, road noise level, how many miles of tread life you get (see mileage, right), and more.

ABOUT THE SCORES:
Median: 63
Range: 55-74

COMFY RIDE & LONG TREAD LIFE
Michelin CrossClimate2
(85,000 miles)
$200

74 OVERALL SCORE

SUPER-QUIET CHOICE
General Altimax 365 AW
(60,000 miles)
$165

66 OVERALL SCORE

GOOD FOR FUEL ECONOMY
Firestone All Season
(65,000 miles)
$145

61 OVERALL SCORE

Ask Our Experts

I just put a new set of tires on my car, and my gas mileage went down. Why?

WHEN YOU REPLACE your tires, you may see a slight decrease in your gas mileage because the fuller tread of a new tire is heavier and flexes more with the road compared with older tires, which have a shallower tread depth. "Tires literally lose rubber over time," says CR tire expert Ryan Pszczolkowski. That means your old tires required a little less energy to turn, thus using less fuel than your newer tires with deeper treads. As they wear, the fuel economy of your new tires will improve, but you'll also see a slight decrease in the foul-weather grip. Nevertheless, don't hang on to unsafe, worn-out tires to save a few pennies. Buy new tires that do well in our tests and that will last, like the ones above.

ILLUSTRATION: SERGE BLOCH

POOR — EXCELLENT | RECOMMENDED | CR BEST BUY

For the latest ratings of these and other product categories, readers with a Digital or All Access membership can go to **CR.org**.

Countertop Microwaves

WE TESTED: 63 models
WE TEST FOR: How evenly and quickly it heats and how well it defrosts, amount of usable capacity in cubic feet, how noisy it is when operating, and more.

ABOUT THE SCORES:
Median: 64
Range: 33-89

LARGE, WITH EVEN HEATING
LG MSWN1590L
12" H x 22" W x 17" D
$170

85 OVERALL SCORE

MIDSIZED BARGAIN
Galanz GSWWD11S1S10
12" H x 21" W x 16" D
$95

72 OVERALL SCORE

SMALL & QUIET
Insignia NS-MW07BK0
10" H x 18" W x 13" D
$60

63 OVERALL SCORE

Soundbars

WE TESTED: 37 full-featured models
WE TEST FOR: How easy a model is to set and use, how versatile it is in terms of features, the quality of sound it produces, and more.

ABOUT THE SCORES:
Median: 54
Range: 36-73

SUPERIOR SOUND QUALITY
Sonos Arc
$900

73 OVERALL SCORE

COMPACT AND EASY TO USE
Denon Home Sound Bar 550
$500

60 OVERALL SCORE

GOOD SOUND FOR A NICE PRICE
Yamaha YAS-209
$350

60 OVERALL SCORE

Toilets

WE TESTED: 59 models
WE TEST FOR: A model's ability to move simulated solid waste through the bowl and trap, how well the flush cleans the bowl, how quiet the flush is, and more.

ABOUT THE SCORES:
Median: 70
Range: 38-79

BEST SINGLE-FLUSH TOILET
Kohler Kelston K-3754
$275

79 OVERALL SCORE

TOP DUAL-FLUSH TOILET
American Standard Edgemere 204BA200.020
$270

77 OVERALL SCORE

BUDGET-FRIENDLY DUAL-FLUSH
Glacier Bay N2428R-DF
(Home Depot)
$100

73 OVERALL SCORE

Chainsaws

WE TESTED: 58 models
WE TEST FOR: How easy it is to start, how fast it cuts through a 10-inch-square oak beam, how safe it is to use (including the intensity of the kickback), and more.

ABOUT THE SCORES:
Median: 68
Range: 34-82

BEST BATTERY-POWERED SAW
Ego CS1804
$370

82 OVERALL SCORE

LIGHTWEIGHT BATTERY PICK FOR LESS
Ryobi Ry40550
$280

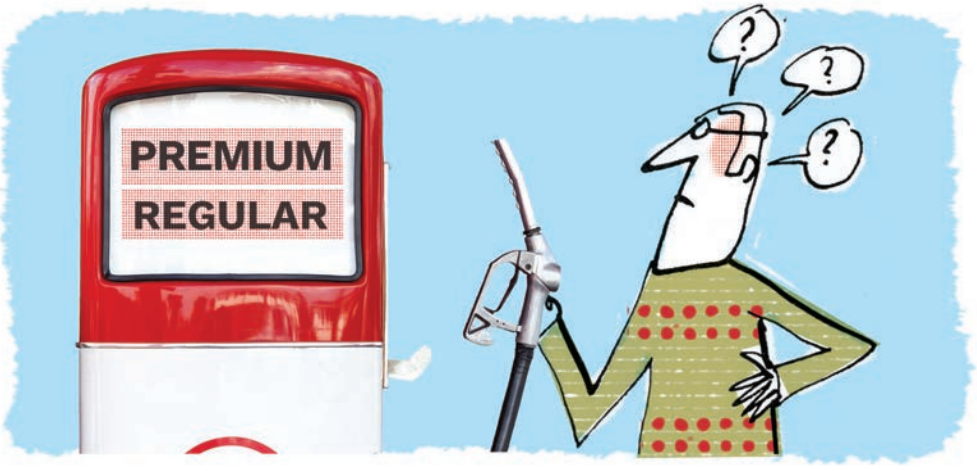
78 OVERALL SCORE

TOP GAS-POWERED MODEL
Echo CS-590-20
$420

77 OVERALL SCORE

Note: *We rate different products according to different testing protocols; as a result, Overall Scores of one product category are not comparable with those of another.*

COMING NEXT MONTH Laptops & More



My car uses premium gas, but I'd rather fill up with regular to save money. Is that okay?

WHO WOULDN'T WANT to fill up on cheaper gas, given the high prices right now? And premium gas, according to AAA, costs roughly 70 cents more (at press time) per gallon than regular. But whether you can fill up with regular depends on the vehicle you own. Some cars can take both types of gas, but others can't, depending on how those cars were designed by the manufacturer. To find out, check the inside of the fuel door or filler lid on your vehicle (or look in your owner's manual). If there's no label on the filler lid that states the type of gas required, or if it simply reads "Unleaded," then using regular 87 octane is fine. If it says "Premium Required," then you must use premium. But what if it says "Premium Recommended"? This means that premium gas is optional. It may be preferred by the manufacturer because the company believes it will provide better fuel economy and/or acceleration. But our tests have shown that the difference is negligible for the average driver in most scenarios. If you go with regular, and your car's performance seems sluggish, or you hear pinging or knocking (indicating improper fuel ignition), then switch back to premium.

LEARN

We have more than 140 in-house experts who research, test, and compare. Submit your questions at CR.org/askourexperts ... and watch for the answers.

What is monkeypox, and should I be worried about it?

MONKEYPOX IS A viral illness similar to smallpox, but it's not as contagious or as deadly. We already have a vaccine because monkeypox isn't a new virus: The first human case was reported in 1970 in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It has gotten so much attention this year because in the past, the virus was not widespread outside of West and Central Africa. Now, cases have been found in at least 48 countries, including Australia, Canada, the U.K., and the U.S.

Monkeypox is generally spread by close physical contact, and the risk for most people in the U.S. remains lower than it is for COVID-19, which is far more contagious. Still, the World Health Organization has put the international community on high alert because monkeypox does have the potential to become more widespread.

Whatever the status of the global monkeypox outbreak, it's always a good idea to watch for signs of any infectious disease, especially if you're immunocompromised. A monkeypox infection can begin with fever, headache, muscle aches and backaches, chills, exhaustion, and swollen lymph nodes in the neck, armpits, and/or groin. The monkeypox rash looks like pimples or blisters; some people only get the rash. Most recover without treatment, but the virus can be more dangerous for children or those with compromised immunity. If you develop a rash and/or flu-like symptoms, call your doctor. For more information on what the monkeypox rash looks like, go to **CR.org/monkeypox**.

My wireless earbuds are always low on battery power or they won't "pair." Should I just stick with wired ones?

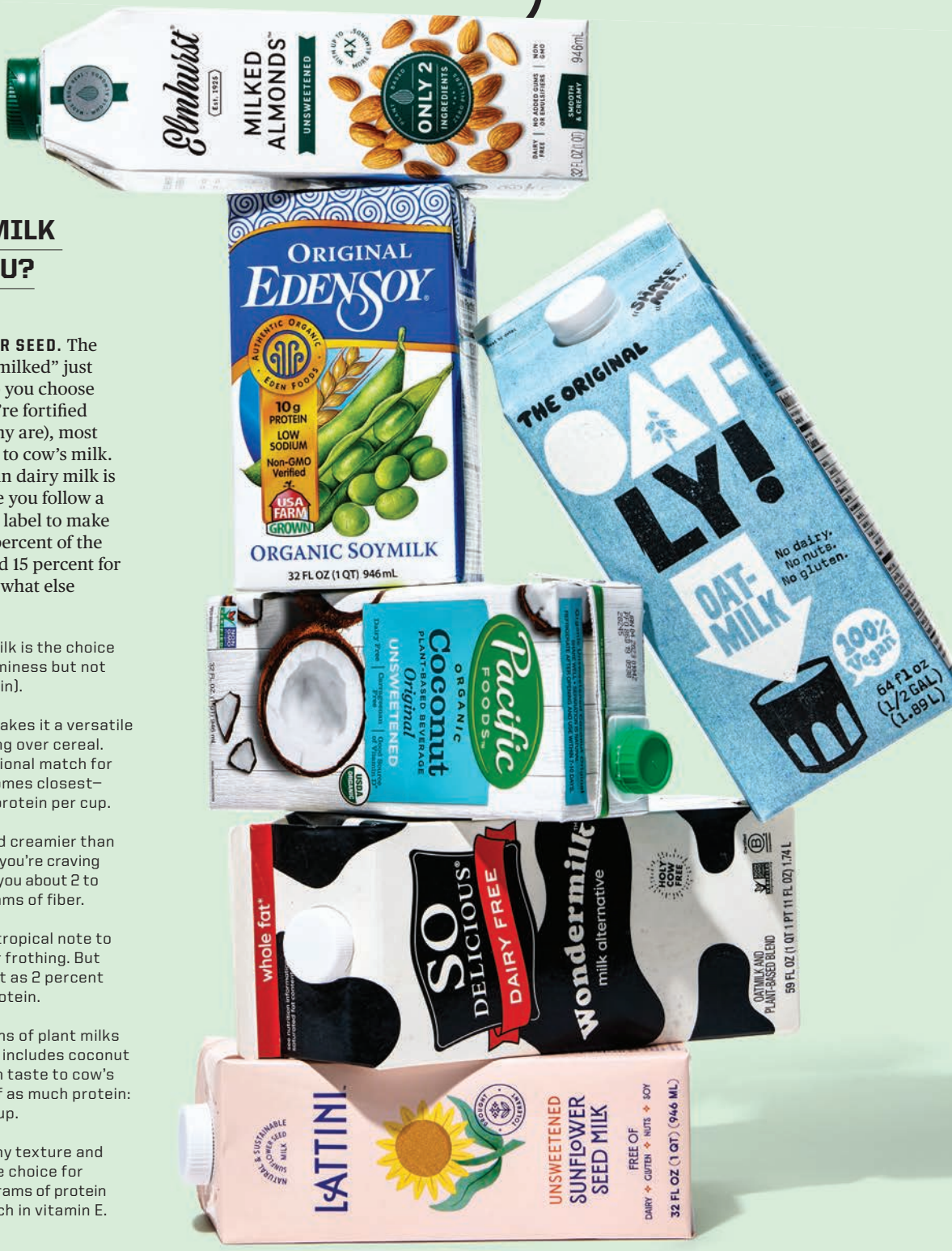
YOU COULD. WIRED headphones are easy to use and top-rated models offer the best sound quality—and you don't have to charge them. But the convenience of wireless headphones may outweigh some of their limitations. For example, when you're exercising, wired headphones tether you to your device and can snag on stuff. Wireless buds don't have those issues, plus they can connect to a device up to 30 feet or more away, so you can stick your smartphone in your pocket, or leave it across the room, without interrupting listening.

Another consideration: Most new smartphones no longer have traditional headphone jacks, which means you'll need to use a dongle attachment to plug into your phone. Wireless buds eliminate that need. They'll pair with any device that has a compatible Bluetooth connection. If you have trouble pairing yours, follow our setup guide at **CR.org/bluetoothguide**.

You may not have to charge wireless buds as often as you think, either. Many models are claimed to last for well over a day on a single charge. For top-rated picks with the best battery life, go to **CR.org/bestbuds**.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY SERGE BLOCH

CR Insights



IN THE KNOW

WHICH PLANT MILK IS BEST FOR YOU?

OAT. ALMOND. SUNFLOWER SEED. The variety of plants getting "milked" just keeps growing. So how do you choose among them? Unless they're fortified with nutrients (which many are), most plant milks don't stack up to cow's milk. If matching the nutrients in dairy milk is important to you—because you follow a vegan diet, say—check the label to make sure it supplies about 20 percent of the daily value for calcium and 15 percent for vitamin D per cup. Here's what else to know as you shop.

ALMOND Neutral almond milk is the choice when you want a little creaminess but not much added flavor (or protein).

SOY Its mild beany flavor makes it a versatile choice for drinking or pouring over cereal. If you're looking for a nutritional match for protein in cow's milk, soy comes closest—and it has 7 to 12 grams of protein per cup.

OAT It's a little sweeter and creamier than other plant milks—nice when you're craving a richer drink. A cup will give you about 2 to 4 grams of protein and 2 grams of fiber.

COCONUT It adds a subtle tropical note to smoothies, and it's good for frothing. But it has as much saturated fat as 2 percent dairy milk and little to no protein.

BLENDS These combinations of plant milks (such as Wondermilk, which includes coconut and oat milks) are closest in taste to cow's milk—but they have only half as much protein: about 4 grams or less per cup.

SUNFLOWER SEED A creamy texture and mild flavor makes this a nice choice for cereal or oatmeal. It has 2 grams of protein per cup—and it's naturally rich in vitamin E.

PHOTO: BEN GOLDSTEIN. PROP STYLING: MIAKO KATOH. FOOD STYLING: JAMIE KIMM

OUTSIDE THE LABS

These Lightbulbs Really Save Money

IF YOU'RE STILL using incandescent bulbs, you're wasting money every time you flick on your lights. Switch to energy-efficient LED bulbs (LED stands for "light-emitting diode") and you could save around $225 in energy costs per year. LED bulbs also last up to 25 times longer than incandescents. And they come in "smart" versions, meaning you can program and control them remotely—potentially reducing your electric bill because they'll turn on only when needed. Here are a few LED bulbs to try, plus key lighting terms.

A BRIGHT IDEA

TP-Link Kasa Smart WiFi Lightbulb Multicolor KL125
$10; Amazon
WORKS WITH Amazon Alexa, Google Home/Assistant, Samsung SmartThings.
CR'S TAKE Our evaluators praised the simple controls and the automated functions this bulb offers. You can set it to turn on, turn off, or dim at sunrise or sunset every day. Setup wasn't as easy: Once you've downloaded the app, you have to pair each bulb to it.

FAST CONTROLS & NICE DIMMING

Cree Lighting Connected Max LED Smart Bulb
$10; Amazon, Lowe's, Walmart
WORKS WITH Amazon Alexa, Apple Siri Shortcuts (not HomeKit), Google Home/Assistant, Samsung SmartThings.
CR'S TAKE This Energy Star certified bulb responds without delay when you turn it on or off, dim it, or change the color using your smartphone or by voice command. It pairs easily to your phone via Bluetooth.

EASIEST TO SET UP

Philips Smart WiFi LED Color and Tunable White A19
$13; Home Depot, Walmart
WORKS WITH Amazon Alexa, Apple Siri Shortcuts, Google Home/Assistant, Samsung SmartThings.
CR'S TAKE Also an Energy Star bulb, it's a breeze to set up because it doesn't require you to create an account in order to control it from your smartphone. And Philips offers a wide range of bulb types and sizes.

3 MUST-KNOW BULB TERMS

KELVIN: A unit used to measure color temperature.

2500K	2700K	3000K	3500K	4000K	6500K
EXTRA-WARM WHITE	WARM WHITE	WHITE/ WARM WHITE	WHITE	COOL WHITE	DAYLIGHT

450 LUMENS	40W
800 LUMENS	60W
1,100 LUMENS	75W
1,600 LUMENS	100W

LUMENS: A measure of the maximum brightness of a lightbulb.

WHITE TUNING: The ability of a smart bulb to change the color temperature of its light from warm (orange- or pink-toned) to cool (blue-toned) white. Some have "follow the sun" or circadian modes, where they shift between warm and cool light throughout the day, as sunlight does.

PHOTOS, BOTTOM, LEFT TO RIGHT: CONSUMER REPORTS; DISCOVER; CONSUMER REPORTS; OTTO STEININGER; CONSUMER REPORTS

CR Time Traveler MONEY SAVERS

1942 Men's shirts are becoming pricier and less well-made, CR reports. We rate 35 brands—and find that only five shirts are worth their price.

1950 The first independent credit card used at multiple retailers is introduced by Diners' Club. It's made of cardboard.

1955 Some women's suits cost twice as much as this $30 J. C. Penney two-piece, but when we test suits, none have better quality.

1968 Terry Loebel founds Valpak, a direct mail company, sending coupons from local retailers to potential shoppers around Clearwater, Fla.

valpak

1978 "Proper insulation could cut your heating and cooling bills in half," CR reports. We tell readers how to balance installation costs with fuel savings.

POOR — EXCELLENT | RECOMMENDED

COOK-OFF

Veggie Sausages for Meat Lovers

CAN A PLANT-BASED hot dog or bratwurst hold its own against a sausage made with meat? That's the question our hungry, meat-loving staffers set out to answer when they cooked up five popular vegetarian choices to see how they compared with the real thing. Below, find out which ones we loved–and which aren't quite ready for prime time.

EDITOR'S CHOICE

Impossible Sausage Bratwurst $7.29 for 4

If nobody told us what we were eating, we might have assumed these were a great chicken sausage: a bit lighter in flavor than a pork or beef brat, but still juicy, complex, and delicious. "I can't believe it's not meat," says CR's grilling expert, Paul Hope. "Perfect, uniform, didn't taste overly processed … and crispy as heck."

A BRATWURST ANYONE WILL LOVE

Beyond Bratwurst $6.49 for 4

Juicy, garlicky, richly savory, with a tiny bit of sweetness: Though not quite as believable a stand-in for meat as the Impossible brat, these sausages come pretty close. This brat is "rich and aromatic, with notes of fennel and a deep umami flavor," Hope says. Our testers found it hearty and filling, too.

BEST HOT DOG

Field Roast Classic Smoked Plant-Based Frankfurters $5.99 for 6

Though this hot dog doesn't taste exactly like a real beef or pork hot dog, it comes closer than the other two, and it might appeal to people who don't like the taste of meat. It was perfectly salted and had a smooth, hot-dog-like texture that many veggie dogs lack.

QUICK & EASY BUDGET-FRIENDLY DOG

Lightlife Smart Dogs $3.20 for 8

This dog tasted surprisingly smoky (maybe a little artificially smoky). But it has a pretty good meaty yet smooth texture–not dense, gritty, or spongy, like some other veggie dogs we tried. That said, it was a bit bland. "A little more spice would help make it taste more like a real dog," Hope says.

AN UNSATISFYING DOG

Upton's Naturals Updog Vegan Hot Dog $5.99 for 4

One of our tasters actually spit this hot dog out after chewing to fully evaluate the flavor. It had a sandy texture with an overpowering flavor of onion. "It was mealy, pulpy, and salty, with a distracting texture," Hope says. Save your money (and your tastebuds), and try one of the others.

PHOTO: TOP RIGHT: IMPOSSIBLE FOODS

1983 Home computers–still relatively new products–keep track of your finances, we report. For under $30, you can buy a program to balance your checkbook, manage charge accounts, and more.

1992 Almost identical coverage from different auto insurers can vary in cost by thousands of dollars, we say, touting USAA's premiums.

2008 Groupon, an e-commerce company that offers discounts, launches. Its first-ever deal? Savings at the bar on the floor below Groupon's Chicago office.

GROUPON

2012 Some credit bureaus pressure people to pay up to $240 for reports they could get free. We show CR readers where to find free reports.

2022 We look at top-rated products from our tests and find bargain buys that perform really well, such as this Kenmore vacuum.

Kenmore Pet Friendly 31140 $280

74 OVERALL SCORE

This issue is packed with money-saving advice! Turn to page 24 for our latest savvy tips.

FIRST DRIVE

All-Electric Rivian R1T

WITH ITS DEBUT late last year, the all-electric Rivian R1T has become the most cutting-edge pickup on the market. After spending a day with three versions of the R1T, our testers came away impressed—especially considering it's Rivian's first-ever production vehicle. This truck can accelerate like a sports car and claw its way over boulders with the tenacity of a true off-roading vehicle. It can tow a trailer up to 11,000 pounds and is packed with clever storage features (see below), a removable Bluetooth speaker, a rechargeable flashlight in the driver's door, an air compressor that can reach all four tires, and more.

As much as we like the Rivian, it's pricey, and we'll be watching its reliability closely—first-year models and startup manufacturers tend to have bugs that need to be worked out.

BASE PRICE RANGE $67,500-$85,000
DESTINATION CHARGE $1,500
PRICE AS DRIVEN $95,400
DRIVING RANGE 314 MILES

GORGEOUS CABIN The plush interior has metal accents on the doors and seats, wood trim, and plenty of padding. One negative: Almost every interior control function has to go through the center-dash infotainment screen.

POWER TONNEAU COVER With the press of a button on top of the bed rail, the power tonneau bed cover retracts back toward the cab, disappearing from view as if by magic. Seriously, it's really cool.

GEAR TUNNEL The R1T's most interesting feature may be the gear tunnel that runs across the body, just behind the cab. It's wide enough for a couple of carry-on suitcases. Plus, when they're open, the two side doors double as steps for reaching the roof.

HILL SKILL Each electric motor powers its own wheel, so traction is fantastic: The R1T climbed our rock hill with ease. The off-road mode adjusts the accelerator pedal for rough terrain and raises the ride height for 15 inches of clearance.

AMAZING ACCELERATION Flooring the R1T's throttle pins you back in your seat—the 835 hp coming from four electric motors make it ridiculously quick. Initial R1Ts have an Environmental Protection Agency-estimated driving range of 314 miles per charge, though Rivian says a version coming later will be capable of over 400 miles.

PHOTOS, THIS PAGE: JOHN POWERS/CONSUMER REPORTS

POOR EXCELLENT | RECOMMENDED CR BEST BUY

PRODUCT SPOTLIGHT

Video Doorbells

PORCH PIRATES, BEWARE! Video doorbells—mounted devices that help you keep an eye on package deliveries and let you see who's at your door—are getting more sophisticated. Many cameras now "see" much better at night, and can give you a fuller fish-eye-style view, so you can see packages on steps and walkways. Some camera manufacturers are also offering features (for a subscription fee), that can identify people, animals, vehicles, and packages with real-time smartphone alerts. To help you find the right video doorbell, our ratings chart below reveals the top-rated (and bottom-rated) models in our tests, evaluated based on their video clarity, how quickly alerts are delivered to your smartphone, data privacy protections to help keep hackers at bay, and more.

Logitech Circle View Doorbell 961-000484
$200

81 OVERALL SCORE

- 4/5 VIDEO QUALITY
- 5/5 DATA SECURITY
- 2/5 DATA PRIVACY
- 5/5 RESPONSE TIME
- 3/5 SMART IQ

SimpliSafe Doorbell Pro SS3
$170

76 OVERALL SCORE

- 5/5 VIDEO QUALITY
- 4/5 DATA SECURITY
- 4/5 DATA PRIVACY
- 1/5 RESPONSE TIME
- 1/5 SMART IQ

Ring Video Doorbell 3
$180

74 OVERALL SCORE

- 5/5 VIDEO QUALITY
- 4/5 DATA SECURITY
- 3/5 DATA PRIVACY
- 2/5 RESPONSE TIME
- 3/5 SMART IQ

Lorex LNWDB1 1080p Wi-Fi
$130

74 OVERALL SCORE

- 4/5 VIDEO QUALITY
- 4/5 DATA SECURITY
- 3/5 DATA PRIVACY
- 4/5 RESPONSE TIME
- 3/5 SMART IQ

Lorex 2K QHD B451AJD-E
$150

73 OVERALL SCORE

- 4/5 VIDEO QUALITY
- 4/5 DATA SECURITY
- 3/5 DATA PRIVACY
- 4/5 RESPONSE TIME
- 3/5 SMART IQ

Netatmo Smart Video Doorbell
$300

73 OVERALL SCORE

- 4/5 VIDEO QUALITY
- 4/5 DATA SECURITY
- 3/5 DATA PRIVACY
- 2/5 RESPONSE TIME
- 3/5 SMART IQ

Arlo Essential Video Doorbell (Wire-Free) AVD2001-100NAS
$200

71 OVERALL SCORE

- 4/5 VIDEO QUALITY
- 5/5 DATA SECURITY
- 2/5 DATA PRIVACY
- 4/5 RESPONSE TIME
- 3/5 SMART IQ

Ring Gen. 2 2020
$100

71 OVERALL SCORE

- 4/5 VIDEO QUALITY
- 4/5 DATA SECURITY
- 2/5 DATA PRIVACY
- 4/5 RESPONSE TIME
- 3/5 SMART IQ

Google Nest Doorbell (Wired)
$230

70 OVERALL SCORE

- 4/5 VIDEO QUALITY
- 4/5 DATA SECURITY
- 3/5 DATA PRIVACY
- 5/5 RESPONSE TIME
- 2/5 SMART IQ

TWO DOORBELLS TO SKIP

GoControl GC-DBC-1 $215

35 OVERALL SCORE

- 2/5 VIDEO QUALITY
- 3/5 DATA SECURITY
- 2/5 DATA PRIVACY
- 3/5 RESPONSE TIME
- 1/5 SMART IQ

SpotCam Video Doorbell 2 $100

26 OVERALL SCORE

- 1/5 VIDEO QUALITY
- 2/5 DATA SECURITY
- 2/5 DATA PRIVACY
- 1/5 RESPONSE TIME
- 3/5 SMART IQ

PHOTO, TOP RIGHT: LOGITECH

For more video doorbell ratings, go to CR.org/videodoorbells.

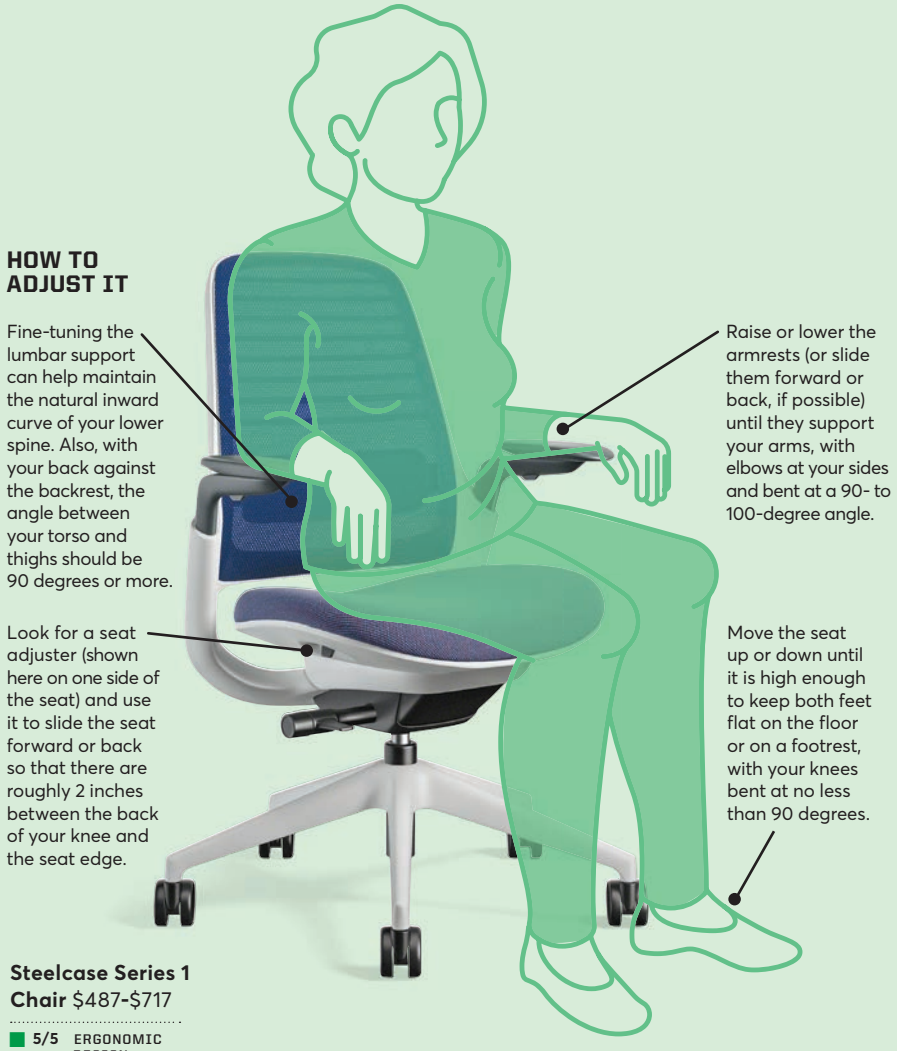
CR SMART SOLUTION

The Most Comfortable Desk Chair for You

A WELL-DESIGNED DESK CHAIR is one of the wisest home upgrades you can make—especially if you sit for hours at a time at a desk. According to the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, products with good ergonomic design—meaning those that have been scientifically designed to fit the people who use them—can help reduce musculoskeletal disorders caused by stress on muscles, nerves, blood vessels, ligaments, and tendons.

But with so many desk chair designs available (some at pretty high prices), and a great deal of them with claims of being "ergonomic," it's not always clear which one will fit and support your body properly, says Paul Ritchey, DrPH, a certified professional ergonomist who led CR's evaluation of desk chairs. "Instead of putting stock in claims, look for adjustability features," he says. Here: our top picks, plus adjustment tips, at right, to use when you try out any chair.

HOW TO ADJUST IT


Fine-tuning the lumbar support can help maintain the natural inward curve of your lower spine. Also, with your back against the backrest, the angle between your torso and thighs should be 90 degrees or more.
Raise or lower the armrests (or slide them forward or back, if possible) until they support your arms, with elbows at your sides and bent at a 90- to 100-degree angle.
Look for a seat adjuster (shown here on one side of the seat) and use it to slide the seat forward or back so that there are roughly 2 inches between the back of your knee and the seat edge.
Move the seat up or down until it is high enough to keep both feet flat on the floor or on a footrest, with your knees bent at no less than 90 degrees.

Steelcase Series 1 Chair $487-$717

- 5/5 ERGONOMIC DESIGN
- 5/5 COMFORT
- 5/5 EASE OF USE
- 5/5 EASE OF ASSEMBLY

CR'S TAKE If you're looking for great value, it's hard to beat this chair. In addition to top scores for ergonomic design, it's the most comfortable model we tried. Our panel admired the lumbar support, and the armrests can be adjusted across a range of heights. Though on the pricey side, it's a worthy buy.

Herman Miller Sayl Chair $695-$1,295

- 5/5 ERGONOMIC DESIGN
- 4/5 COMFORT
- 4/5 EASE OF USE
- 5/5 EASE OF ASSEMBLY

CR'S TAKE This model has a unique design and features the best recline tension control. It offers a wide range of adjustments for the armrests, seat height, and lumbar support. The seat is also comfortable.

Hon Ignition 2.0 Task Chair $340-$460

- 5/5 ERGONOMIC DESIGN
- 4/5 COMFORT
- 3/5 EASE OF USE
- 3/5 EASE OF ASSEMBLY

CR'S TAKE We found this chair to be comfortable and well-designed, with plenty of adjustment options for armrests and lumbar support. One drawback: The seat adjuster might not leave enough space between the seat edge and knees for some people.

Branch Ergonomic Chair $329-$398

- 5/5 ERGONOMIC DESIGN
- 3/5 COMFORT
- 4/5 EASE OF USE
- 4/5 EASE OF ASSEMBLY

CR'S TAKE A less pricey pick with good overall ergonomics and controls to make adjustments. But the pronounced curve of the lumbar support might not be comfortable for some, and the seat depth, while adjustable, could be too deep for shorter users.

For more chair reviews, go to CR.org/deskchairs.

Note: Specific adjustability features vary by chair.

RECALLS

TO STAY INFORMED ABOUT RECALLS FOR YOUR VEHICLES, READERS WITH MEMBERSHIP CAN USE OUR FREE CAR RECALL TRACKER AT **CR.ORG/MORE**.

HONDA RIDGELINE PICKUP TRUCKS

Honda has issued a recall for 112,060 Ridgeline pickup trucks from the 2006 through 2014 model years. The recall affects trucks sold or ever registered in specific states where salt is used on roads during winter. The rear frame of the vehicle might rust if it is exposed to accumulated salt, mud, and dirt, and the fuel tank could detach from the vehicle as a result. This could cause a fire. Vehicles that were sold or registered in Connecticut, Delaware, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, Virginia, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and Washington, D.C., are included in the recall. If the fuel tank is becoming detached from the vehicle, drivers may hear noises from the fuel tank and/or the bands that mount the fuel tank to the frame, according to documents Honda provided to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.
What to do: Honda will mail owner notification letters, but you may also contact Honda at 888-234-2138. Honda dealerships will inspect the rear frame of the recalled vehicles to see whether there is any corrosion. They will either make repairs or—in some cases—offer to purchase the vehicle from the owner.

SCHNEIDER ELECTRIC BREAKER BOXES

Schneider Electric is recalling about 1.4 million Square D QO Plug-on-Neutral load centers, also known as breaker boxes or electrical panels, because they can overheat, posing burn and fire hazards. The panels were sold at authorized Schneider Electric distributors, home improvement and hardware stores, and online, including at Home Depot, Lowe's, and Menard's, from February 2020 through January 2022 for $90 to $1,660.
What to do: Contact Schneider Electric at 888-778-2733 or go to se.com/us/qoloadcenter-safetyrecallnotice for details and to arrange to have the load center inspected by a trained electrician to determine whether replacement or repair is required. The inspection and any resulting repairs are free of charge. If you continue to use the load centers while awaiting repair, you should have working smoke alarms in your home.

WARMWAVE AND HUNTER CERAMIC HEATERS

Sienhua Group is recalling about 580,000 WarmWave and Hunter oscillating heaters because the cord and plug can overheat when in use, posing fire and burn hazards. The heaters were sold at Home Depot stores nationwide and online at Amazon, eBay, and other websites from September 2013 through February 2022 for $30 to $40.
What to do: Stop using the heater and unplug it. Follow the steps at homeproductservice.com/recall on how to sever the cord to make the unit unusable, and call 800-267-7857 or email 18inCeramicHeaterRecall@gmail.com for details and to receive a prorated refund.

KROGER ASPIRIN AND IBUPROFEN

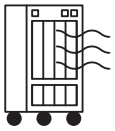
Time-Cap Labs is recalling about 209,000 bottles of Kroger aspirin (300-count) and ibuprofen (160-count) because the packaging of the products is not child-resistant, posing a risk of poisoning. (The Poison Prevention Packaging Act requires that aspirin and ibuprofen be in child-resistant packaging.) The ibuprofen was sold at various stores nationwide from July 2021 through March 2022 for $12 to $16, and the aspirin was sold from August 2021 through March 2022 for about $5.
What to do: Store the bottle out of reach and out of sight of children. Contact Kroger at 800-576-4377 or go to kroger.com/i/recall-alerts for details and disposal and refund information.

HISENSE FRENCH-DOOR REFRIGERATOR

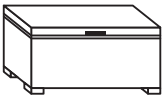
Hisense USA is recalling about 55,200 French-door refrigerators with icemakers because the door hinge can break, causing the door to detach, which poses an injury hazard when someone tries to open the French doors. The fridges were sold at Lowe's stores nationwide and online at lowes.com from August 2020 through February 2022 for about $1,500.
What to do: If the doors fail to open or close normally, stop using the refrigerator until it is repaired. Contact Hisense USA at 888-497-1189 or go to hisense-usa.com for details and to schedule a free in-home service appointment to have the refrigerator door hinges replaced.

SEPTEMBER IS THE BEST TIME TO BUY ...

AIR PURIFIERS

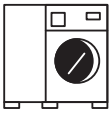


FREEZERS



LAWN MOWERS

WASHING MACHINES



For more info, go to CR.org/buy.

PRODUCT UPDATE

THE LATEST RATINGS FROM OUR LABS

1
2
3
Edit
Share
Mexico Scuba Diving: Sequence 01
NETFLIX
SPARRING PARTNERS
(1)
It was one of those raw, windy, dreary Monday afternoons in February when gloom settled over the land and seasonal depression was rampant. Court was not in session. The phone wasn't ringing. Petty criminals and other potential clients were busy elsewhere with no thoughts whatsoever of hiring lawyers. The occasional caller was more likely to be a man or woman still reeling from holiday overspending and seeking advice about unpaid credit card accounts. Those were quickly sent next door, or across the square, or anywhere.
Jake was at his desk upstairs, making little progress with the stack of paperwork he'd been neglecting for weeks, even months. With no court or hearings scheduled for days, it
Sparring Partners
John Grisham
#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER • John Grisham is the acknowledged master of the legal thriller. In his first collection of novellas, law is a common thread, but America's favorite storyteller has several surprises in store.
+ More
See in store
Share

Top Tablets From Our Tests

Find a model with all the features you need for the right price. Our experts tell you how.

by Thomas Germain

TABLETS WERE ONCE looked at as a computing revolution, a technology that could replace the laptop—or at least compete with it—eliminating the need for a mouse and keyboard. But that vision, articulated by Steve Jobs when Apple launched the first iPad in 2010, hasn't come to fruition.

Instead, over the past dozen years tablets have settled into a comfortable role as a third screen. Laptops are our workhorses, while cell phones are indispensable aids—as vital at times as your keys and eyeglasses. In comparison, tablets are decidedly optional. They're relaxation devices, best suited for moments spent reading in a café or on the beach, watching movies on a plane, or checking Facebook while dinner's in the oven.

For such a low-key product, tablets can be confusing to shop for, mainly because they range so widely in price, from $50 to more than $1,000. And depending on your needs, an expensive model might not serve you any better than a lower-priced one.

To pick a tablet you'll enjoy, start by deciding which of the following tiers makes sense for you in terms of the cost and what the tablets deliver.

Tablets for Reading $50-$200

Let's say you just want a tablet you can use to enjoy a book and read your email, and then slip it into a tote bag before heading out for the weekend. For that, inexpensive options from companies including Amazon and Onn (Walmart's house brand) can be a great choice. You can pick up a decent one starting at just $50 or so.

But there are some trade-offs with these inexpensive tablets. None of the options in this price range have a screen that earns more than a score of Good in Consumer Reports' testing. That means colors won't be as vivid as on more highly rated models, and pictures may not be as sharp. That doesn't matter for reading, but it could detract from a movie.

In addition, these tablets can grind to a crawl if they're asked to play graphics-heavy games or edit a video. Don't worry, though: You won't notice a time lag if you're simply turning the pages of an ebook in your Kindle app.

In some respects, these tablets can even be standout performers. The Amazon Fire HD 8, which costs around $90, delivers a battery life of 15.8 hours for web browsing in CR's tests—more than the $400 iPad Mini's 10.7. And the Fire HD 8's very bright screen makes it a good choice for reading outside.

An even cheaper option is the Amazon Fire 7, which costs just $50. For that price, you might assume there's a catch—and there is. The low display resolution (which means details on the screen aren't as crisp) and sluggish performance help keep the Fire 7 from getting a CR recommendation. But it does have glare reduction, important for comfortable reading.

Amazon tablets have another disadvantage to keep in mind: You can download apps only from Amazon's app store. Among the common ones missing are Gmail and YouTube. But you can sub in Amazon's own alternatives or use those services in a web browser on the tablet, just as though you were using a laptop.

Spend moderately more and you have higher-performing options. For example, the Samsung Galaxy Tab A 8.0 (2019) costs $160, but it's still much less expensive than the cheapest iPad. It's a solid little machine that boasts an Excellent rating for convenience, which reflects how easy the tablet is to use, along with Very Good ratings for performance—how fast the processor can perform various actions—and the display quality. You also get access to all the apps in the Google Play app store.

Movie-Worthy Screens $300-$600

Lots of people watch movies and TV series on their tablets. You can make that more pleasant by stepping up to a midpriced model, paying around $300 or more. In this price range, you can find a tablet with vivid colors, lots of contrast, and sharp details.

These tablets will typically have a little extra processing power, too, which can make it faster to switch between applications and make mobile games run more smoothly.

PHOTO: JOHN WALSH/CONSUMER REPORTS. SCREENSHOTS: EMILIE HARJES/CONSUMER REPORTS (FISH FOOTAGE); NETFLIX (BRIDGERTON STILL)

SMART PICKS AT EVERY PRICE

1 PRO-LEVEL PERFORMANCE

APPLE IPAD PRO 12.9
$1,200
89 OVERALL SCORE

This tablet has a huge high-resolution screen and the computing power for sophisticated jobs like fast photo editing—but it may be overkill for most users.

2 MOVIE-WORTHY DISPLAY

SAMSUNG GALAXY TAB S6 LITE
$330
80 OVERALL SCORE

This Samsung works beautifully, whether you want to read a book in bright sunshine or cuddle up in bed to watch a film.

3 BEST BUDGET BUY

AMAZON FIRE HD 8
$90
69 OVERALL SCORE

This tablet is all you need to scan the news, review email, or read a novel. The display isn't as sharp as on pricier models, but the device offers excellent battery life.

POOR — EXCELLENT | RECOMMENDED | CR BEST BUY

Apple's basic iPad costs $300, and it's the best choice for many people. It has enough processing power to handle the vast majority of apps, and the 10.2-inch display earns an Excellent rating.

Two more options are the Samsung Galaxy Tab S6 and S6 Lite. These score a bit lower than the iPad for display quality but have twice as much internal storage, plus a slot for adding an external memory card, both useful if you'll have lots of photos and videos on your device.

Apple and Samsung tablets get top marks for predicted reliability. Apple also gets an Excellent rating for owner satisfaction, and Samsung scores a Very Good. Which one you choose may come down to the brand of phone you already have and the suite of apps you're used to. Buying a tablet from the same brand can create a more seamless experience across devices.

If you can spend $400 or more, you have lots of great tablets to choose from. For instance, the iPad Mini ($400) has a top-scoring 8-inch display, an excellent camera, and more than 10 hours of battery life. It's an easy-to-handle device that gives you lots more screen real estate than your phone but can still slip into many purses and maybe even a coat pocket.

If you want a larger screen, consider the 10.9-inch iPad Air, which costs $600. In addition to giving you a bigger screen, it's faster than the Mini or the regular iPad and can handle many games, along with photo and video editing apps.

Pro-Level Tablets
$800 to $1,300+

If you're wondering whether it's worth swinging for something as powerful as the iPad Pro, the answer for most people is no. That tablet, and the Samsung Galaxy Tab S8 Ultra, are similar in performance to a highly rated laptop. And they cost more than many laptops do, from $800 to well over $1,000.

This is where tablets edge into professional territory. Graphic artists and other people in creative fields who buy these machines can use their easily portable, intuitive touch screens (instead of a laptop or desktop computer) to work on illustrations, videos, and music editing.

You can do most of those tasks on midrange tablets like the iPad Air, too, but you might see the tablet slow down, especially on complex projects. In contrast, a machine like the iPad Pro is great if you need best-in-class speed and a bigger screen that will let you see an entire large image as you work–so you won't have to scroll to just one small section at a time.

Fewer people choose the Samsung Galaxy Tab S8 Ultra. One attraction is that it has a huge screen, a whopping 14.6 inches compared with the biggest iPad Pro's 12.9 inches.

That's so big that it's heavy and unwieldy to prop up in one hand. The Ultra starts about $1,300, and like many tablets, it gets even more expensive when you add features like extra storage and 5G wireless connectivity.

Tablets With Keyboards

You can buy a separate external keyboard for most tablets and prop up the screen so it's just like typing on a laptop. (See "Best Tablet Accessories," below.) That's fine if you want to use

Best Tablet Accessories

These handy extras can help safeguard your case and screen, and make your device easier to use—and more versatile.

Protective Case
$20-$80

Drop your tablet and—just like a phone—the body or screen can crack. A protective case can prevent that from happening. In addition, some cases can fold back to let you prop up your tablet on a table or kitchen counter. That's helpful when you're following a recipe or just watching a movie. All but the fanciest options cost well under $100. This Speck Balance Folio 11-Inch iPad Pro cover (2018) is $20.

Stylus
$20-$130

Tapping and pinching with your fingers is fine, but if you're drawing or writing longhand on a tablet, it's much easier to use a stylus. There are many inexpensive ones to choose from. If you like doing art on an iPad, however, consider treating yourself to the $130 Apple Pencil (2nd Gen.), a precise tool designed to work with iPads and a variety of apps for tasks like drawing, note-taking, and photo editing.

the keyboard only occasionally and if you like the phonelike interface of devices like the iPad.

But let's say you want a regular Windows laptop that you'll almost always use with a keyboard and mouse—but you'd like to have a tablet once in a while, too. Instead of buying two devices, you could get a detachable laptop like the models in Microsoft's line of Surface 2-in-1 PCs.

People use these devices as laptops most of the time, and CR includes them in our laptop ratings. But in some ways they're tabletesque. For one thing, you buy the screen and keyboard separately. For the Surface Go 3 model, which earns an Overall Score of 56 in CR's testing, the combined price is around $580.

For most tasks, detachables like a Surface computer are easier to use with a keyboard and mouse, but you can also use your finger to tap and swipe when you want to. Regular tablets are just the opposite; they're meant to be held in your hands and controlled through touch, just like a smartphone.

GREAT APPS FOR YOUR TABLET

These apps are available for iPad and Android tablets, but you may need to find alternatives if you have an Amazon Fire.

MOVIE AND TV STREAMING
Just about every streaming service has an app, including Amazon Prime, Apple TV+, HBO Max, and Netflix. Many allow you to download videos to watch later when you're offline.

NOTE-TAKING
One good option is Notion, which has templates for to-do lists, budgets, and more. If you also install it on your cell phone or computer, the app will update across all of your devices, so you'll have access to your notes when you're not using your tablet.

CALENDARS
You can replace physical calendars with a tablet and a desktop stand. If you're already using a service such as Google calendar on your cell phone and laptop, add it to your tablet to access your appointments on every device.

RECIPES
More portable than a laptop, with a bigger screen than your cell phone, a tablet can be a great alternative to a cookbook. You can search for recipes in your tablet's web browser, and there are plenty of apps for home chefs. These let you search through databases of recipes, save the ones you find, and watch step-by-step videos. Popular options include Allrecipes Dinner Spinner, Food Network Kitchen, Paprika Recipe Manager, and Tasty.

READING
The Kindle app (and a number of alternatives) is a great way to turn your tablet into a portable library, and it's available for iPads, Amazon tablets, and Android devices.

GAMES
Entertain yourself with free apps for solitaire, chess, and sudoku. Crossword fans might like the free Wordscapes or The New York Times' subscription-based Crossword app.

Keyboard
$20-$300

An external keyboard is useful if you sometimes need to do a lot of typing on your tablet. (Tapping away on a screen can be inconvenient.) Any Bluetooth keyboard will work, but it's worth spending more to get an attachable keyboard that's designed to complement your tablet and doubles as a case. Apple's own keyboards for iPads cost $159 and up, but you'll find plenty of options for significantly less.

USB-C Adaptor
$20-$70

A lot of Android tablets have built-in SD card readers for extra storage, and some have multiple ports for USB devices or even HDMI ports for TVs and monitors. But iPads don't, and no matter what kind of device you have, the option to plug in more stuff is always nice. Most new tablets, including iPads, have a USB-C port that's used for both charging and plugging in accessories. You can find a good one for as little as $20.

Screen Protector
$10-$20

Clear adhesive screen protectors can keep the display from getting scratched, which can happen more easily if you travel with your tablet and frequently throw it in a bag with your keys, chargers, and other hard-edged stuff. Consider it cheap insurance that can keep the screen in pristine condition for years. There are many choices available, including this two-pack from Supershieldz for $14.

PHOTOS, FROM LEFT: SPECK; APPLE (2); GETTY IMAGES; SUPERSHIELDZ

Ratings › **Screen Stars** The very highest-rated tablets, such as the iPad Pro 11, have exceptional processing power. But most people will be happy with simpler—and much less expensive—models.

Brand + Model	Overall Score	Price	Survey Results		Test Results					Features						
			Predicted reliability	Owner satisfaction	Performance	Display	Convenience	Specific tasks	Photo and video	Battery life, web (hr.)	Battery life, video (hr.)	Weight (lb.)	Screen size (in.)	Internal storage (GB)	Operating system (as tested)	Memory card reader
9-INCH SCREEN AND LARGER TABLETS																
Apple iPad Pro 11 (128GB) 2021	89	$750	⏫	⏫	⏫	⏫	⏫	⏫	⏫	14.1	12.7	1.0	11.0	128	iOS 14.6	
Apple iPad Pro 11 (5G, 128GB) 2021	89	$900	⏫	⏫	⏫	⏫	⏫	⏫	⏫	10.9	15.1	1.0	11.0	128	iOS 14.5	
Apple iPad Pro 12.9 (5G, 128GB) 2021	89	$1,200	⏫	⏫	⏫	⏫	⏫	⏫	⏫	10.9	15.1	1.5	12.9	128	iOS 14.5	
Apple iPad Pro 12.9 (128GB) 2021	89	$1,000	⏫	⏫	⏫	⏫	⏫	⏫	⏫	10.9	15.1	1.5	12.9	128	iOS 14.5	
Apple iPad (64GB) 2021	87	$300	⏫	⏫	⏫	⏫	⏫	⏫	🔼	11.3	14.5	1.1	10.2	64	iOS 15	
Apple iPad Air (64GB) 2022	85	$600	⏫	⏫	⏫	⏫	⏫	⏫	⏫	6.9	9.3	1.0	10.9	64	iOS 15.4	
Apple iPad Air (WiFi, 4GB, 64GB) 2022	85	$750	⏫	⏫	⏫	⏫	⏫	⏫	⏫	6.9	9.3	1.0	10.9	64	iOS 15.4	
Samsung Galaxy Tab S8 (128GB, WiFi)	84	$700	⏫	🔼	⏫	🔼	⏫	⏫	🔼	13.5	8.6	1.1	11.0	128	Android 12	●
Samsung Galaxy Tab S7	82	$630	⏫	🔼	⏫	🔼	⏫	⏫	🔼	13.0	11.4	1.1	11.0	128	Android 10	●
Samsung Galaxy Tab S8+ (5G, 128GB)	82	$1,280	⏫	🔼	⏫	🔼	⏫	⏫	🔼	7.3	12.6	1.3	12.4	128	Android 12	●
Samsung Galaxy Tab S8 Ultra (128GB, WiFi)	81	$1,300	⏫	🔼	⏫	🔼	⏫	⏫	⏫	7.7	7.4	1.6	14.6	128	Android 12	●
Samsung Galaxy Tab S7 Plus 5G	81	$990	⏫	🔼	⏫	🔼	⏫	⏫	🔼	7.4	11.8	1.3	12.4	128	Android 10	●
Samsung Galaxy Tab S7 Plus	80	$680	⏫	🔼	⏫	🔼	⏫	⏫	🔼	7.9	11.6	1.3	12.4	128	Android 10	●
Samsung Galaxy Tab S6 (128GB) WiFi	80	$350	⏫	🔼	⏫	🔼	⏫	⏫	🔼	8.3	11.3	0.9	10.5	128	Android 9	●
Samsung Galaxy Tab S6 Lite (128GB) WiFi	80	$330	⏫	🔼	🔼	🔼	⏫	⏫	🔼	12.2	10.5	1.0	10.4	128	Android 10	●
Lenovo Yoga Tab 13	76	$400	❗	🔽	⏫	🔼	⏫	⏫	🔼	14.4	12.7	1.8	13.0	128	Android 11	●
Lenovo Yoga Tab 11	74	$270	❗	🔽	⏫	🔼	⏫	🔼	❗	13.5	12.1	1.4	10.9	128	Android 11	●
Amazon Fire HD 10 32GB 2021	71	$150	🔼	❗	🔼	❗	⏫	🔼	❗	14.8	15.7	1.0	10.0	32	Fire OS 7.3	●
Amazon Fire HD10 Plus 32GB	71	$180	🔼	❗	❗	❗	⏫	🔼	❗	16.5	15.9	1.0	10.0	32	Fire OS 7.3	●
Lenovo Tab P11 (WiFi only)	71	$230	❗	🔽	🔼	🔼	🔼	🔼	❗	11.2	11.9	1.1	10.9	128	Android 10	●
Samsung Galaxy Tab A 2019	68	$160	⏫	🔼	🔼	🔼	⏫	🔼	❗	11.1	10.9	1.0	10.1	32	Android 9	●

Brand + Model	Overall Score	Price	Survey Results		Test Results					Features						
			Predicted reliability	Owner satisfaction	Performance	Display	Convenience	Specific tasks	Photo and video	Battery life, web (hr.)	Battery life, video (hr.)	Weight (lb.)	Screen size (in.)	Internal storage (GB)	Operating system (as tested)	Memory card reader
9-INCH SCREEN AND LARGER TABLETS *Continued*																
Lenovo Ideapad Duet Chromebook	67	$280	!	⌄	^	^	^	^	!	12.6	12.1	1.0	10.1	128	ChromeOS 89.0	
Lenovo Yoga Smart Tab with Google Assistant (64GB)	67	$210	!	⌄	^	^	^	^	!	10.7	9.5	1.2	10.0	64	Android 9	●
TCL Tab 10S	67	$170	–	–	^	!	^	^	!	16.1	15.3	1.1	10.0	32	Android 10	●
Onn Tablet Pro 10.1	66	$130	–	–	^	!	^	^	!	8.8	7.4	1.1	10.0	32	Android 10	●
8-INCH SCREEN AND SMALLER TABLETS																
✓ **Apple** iPad Mini (5G, 64GB) 2021	89	$400	^^	^^	^^	^^	^^	^^	^^	10.7	12.4	0.6	8.3	64	iOS 15	
✓ **Apple** iPad Mini (64GB) 2021	89	$400	^^	^^	^^	^^	^^	^^	^^	10.7	12.4	0.6	8.3	64	iOS 15	
✓ **Samsung** Tab Active 3	79	$600	^^	^	^^	^	^^	^^	^	9.4	7.5	0.9	8.0	64	Android 10	●
✓ **Amazon** Fire HD 8	69	$90	^	!	!	!	^	^	!	15.8	15.2	0.8	8.0	32	Fire OS 7.3	●
✓ **Amazon** Fire HD 8 Plus	69	$110	^	!	!	!	^	^	!	13.9	14.7	0.8	8.0	32	Fire OS 7.3	●
Onn Tablet Pro 8	67	$90	–	–	^	!	^	^	⌄	12.5	10.6	0.8	8.0	32	Android 10	●
Amazon Fire 7 (16GB) 2019	65	$50	^	!	!	!	^	^	!	8.8	8.7	0.6	6.9	16	Fire OS 6.3	●
Amazon Fire Kids Edition (16GB)	58	$100	^	!	⌄	!	^	^	⌄	8.4	7.2	0.8	6.9	16	Fire OS 5.6	●

HOW WE TEST: Overall Score combines test results with survey data for predicted reliability and owner satisfaction. **Predicted reliability** estimates the likelihood that newly purchased models from a given brand will develop problems within the first three years of ownership. **Owner satisfaction** reflects the proportion of members extremely likely to recommend the tablet. In cases where we have insufficient survey data to provide a brand-level rating, indicated by a gray dash (-), we give the model average reliability and satisfaction scores. **Performance** reflects the speed of actions and visual smoothness running apps with complex graphics. **Display** covers the quality of the screen, including color, viewing angle, brightness, and outdoor readability. **Convenience** evaluates the ease of using the buttons, keyboard, and touch screen, and interacting with apps. **Specific tasks** rates the ease of doing a variety of activities, including reading books, playing media, using email, and browsing the web, as well as the quality of produced photos and videos. **Photo and video** assesses the quality of the photos taken from the front and rear cameras, and the videos taken from the main (rear) camera. It's based on evaluations of metrics such as color accuracy, visual noise, and video sound quality, as viewed on and off the tablet. Features such as autofocus, flash, and available resolution are also taken into account.

LOWER YOUR MONTHLY BILLS p. 26

BE FIRM AND TOUGH WHEN ASKING FOR A DEAL. FRIENDLY FOLKS PAID 15 PERCENT MORE FOR THE SAME ITEM THAN THOSE WHO WERE LESS WARM WHEN BARGAINING.

GOOD TO KNOW

Consider self-checkout: "When you scan your own items, you have to pay attention, notice the price of everything, and decide if you really need each of them."

—ANDREA WOROCH, CONSUMER FINANCE EXPERT

HOW

The tactics that can help

SAVE M

from cell phone bills to ins

NO

FRUGAL FACT

Your cell phone company might offer a monthly discount of $5 to $10 if you enroll in paperless billing.

Warehouse clubs like Costco often sell gas for up to 20 cents a gallon less. Check for those with gas stations, and ask if you need to be a member.

CUT YOUR FOOD AND GAS COSTS p. 30

W TO

you spend less on everything

MONEY

urance coverage to groceries

OW

by
MANDY WALKER

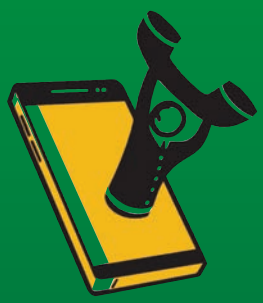
illustrations by
JASON SCHNEIDER

GOOD TO KNOW

70%

of people in one CR survey were able to negotiate a lower price (or another perk) on their internet, TV, and home phone plans.

Source: CR survey of 34,107 members who reported on their bundled telecommunications plans, conducted in 2021.



REPAIR, REPLACE, OR BUY USED? p. 32

SLASH A BIG MEDICAL BILL p. 29

IF YOU HAVE THE FUNDS TO PAY WHAT YOU OWE IN FULL, REQUEST A PROMPT PAY DISCOUNT FROM THE HEALTHCARE PROVIDER. THIS MAY SAVE YOU ABOUT 15% OR MORE.

LOWER YOUR MONTHLY BILLS

With inflation rising faster than it has in 40 years, you likely feel the financial sting at every turn.

You experience it as the grocery store cashier totals what you've put in your shopping cart, when you pump gas for your commute, each time you open your utility bills, and when you set out to book a vacation to try and get away from it all.

In June, the Department of Labor reported that the consumer price index—the measure of overall change in the cost of a set of specific goods and services—was up 9.1 percent over a year earlier, representing the largest 12-month increase since November 1981. And the costs of some goods have spiked more dramatically than others. Fuel oil prices are up 98.5 percent, gas has risen 59.9 percent, and groceries are up 12.2 percent. Household debt, such as mortgages and car loans, has also increased. It's little wonder that in a nationally representative Consumer Reports survey of 2,076 U.S. adults conducted in May, 64 percent of people said they were very or extremely concerned about inflation-related cost increases.

Now, you may see and hear plenty of advice about how to cut debt and rein in your burgeoning bills. But this often feels complicated, even overwhelming. Where do you start? Can you really reduce spending on life's necessities? And if it's possible, won't figuring out how to do it take endless hours?

Consumer Reports experts and outside financial pros have contributed to this step-by-step guide to help you pare your regular costs by hundreds of dollars. "At a time when we're all feeling the pain of inflation, it's both important and easy to get better deals on many of your monthly bills," says Ben Kurland, co-founder of BillFixers, a service that negotiates lower bills for consumers. All it takes is a little advance reconnaissance, a few phone calls, and some willingness to negotiate.

GOOD TO KNOW

Gather the Facts

In addition to checking cable, cell, and internet provider websites for deals, ask your neighbors what they pay. Some companies price services locally.

HERE'S A SECRET. The companies that bill you regularly all have protocols for giving consumers better deals, Kurland says: "But they rely on the fact that you're not going to call and ask." Below, a plan for doing just that.

STEP 1

Take a good look at monthly bills. On a day when you can spare a couple of hours, pull out monthly bills such as cable, cell phone, and internet. In a 2021 CR survey of 34,107 members, about 70 percent who tried to negotiate for lower prices on cable TV, internet, and/or home phone services got a reduction (or another perk) on their bundled plans. "All those industries have easy-to-find,

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY DOMENIC BAHMANN

competitive deals you can use as leverage," says Steven McKean, co-founder and CEO of Billshark, a bill negotiating company. Check your bills for any services you no longer want or need. "For example, the $10 per month you were happy to pay to insure your smartphone when it was new might not make sense now that it's 6 years old," Kurland says. Or you may be a new empty nester but still paying for superfast internet that the kids used to use for gaming. Circle your total costs, along with any fees or charges you don't understand.

STEP 2

Check providers' websites for deals. You want to see what discounts they're offering, especially to new customers. Major cell phone carriers, for example, may be providing subscriptions to services such as streaming music or premium TV channels (and getting these could save you $10 to $15 per month if you can cancel them elsewhere). "If you don't arm yourself with that information first, you're going into a negotiation blind," Kurland says. "You won't know when they're giving you a small discount just to get you off the phone, or if they're handing you a really good deal." While online, also take a look for simple changes that might lower your bill. For example, your cell phone company might offer discounts of $5 to $10 per month just for enrolling in paperless billing.

STEP 3

Choose the best day and time to contact companies. To get the biggest discount as quickly as possible, you want to talk to someone (yes, on the phone). Most people call after they get off work or on the weekends, which is when wait times are at their longest. If you schedule your call during normal business hours–9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday–you can often get through to a live person in a couple of minutes, Kurland says.

STEP 4

Speak to a retention specialist. With your research on deals in hand, dial the provider's customer service number, which should be on its bills or website. But this isn't your final stop: Customer support's job is to get you off the phone, and they'll probably offer you little or nothing, Kurland says. Instead, say something like, "I'm John Doe, and I'm thinking about canceling my service," to get to the retention department. "The retention department's job is to save customers and negotiate discounts with them to make them happy, so that's the department you want," Kurland says. If they fail to transfer you right away, ask specifically for the retention department, and keep asking until you are connected.

FRUGAL FACT

Timing Is Important

When calling a company to ask for a deal, time it so you have the best chance of getting to a live person quickly. Wait times are at their longest after work hours and on weekends. But if you call during normal business hours—9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday—you can often get through in just a couple of minutes.

STEP 5

Ask open-ended questions. When you reach a retention rep, your most powerful tools are questions that start with who, whose, what, when, which, why, or how, according to the Harvard Law School Program on Negotiation. These are key because the answers require elaboration. McKean suggests starting with: "We enjoy your services, but inflation has been tough and I'm looking to cut costs. What can you do to help me?" "They may end up telling you about a new offer you didn't even see," McKean says. Write down the name, title, and phone number of anyone you speak with, and what they say, so you have a record.

STEP 6

Push back. Don't jump at the first offer. A retention rep's goal is to keep you as a customer with little impact to the company's bottom line. It's up to you to say, "What can you do to get me an even better deal?" Kurland says. And here's where your research on the provider's website may come in handy:

My Favorite Save

GETTING CASH BACK FROM MY CREDIT CARD

Thanks to my parents, I find saving money a thrill. So when considering a new credit card, I make sure there are cash-back incentives. My Capital One Venture card has been a never-ending coupon since I enrolled. In addition to saving $50 a month, on average, by taking advantage of the weekly cash-back deals it offers from various retail partners, this year I used my card's tax partner to qualify for 100 percent back on filing fees. I file returns in two states, so this saved me roughly $200.

TANYA CHRISTIAN
home editor

PHOTO: NORA WILLIAMS

If you've seen, for instance, a better deal on the site but the rep isn't offering it, bring it up. And be polite but not chummy. A 2019 Harvard Business Review experiment involving more than 1,500 people found that warm and friendly negotiators ended up paying 15 percent more for the same item than tough and firm folks. "Keep your tone calm, clear, and consistent about what you want," says Ben Kurland at BillFixers.

STEP 7

Check the offer numbers. In some cases, your bill can climb higher during a negotiation, often thanks to bundled offers. "If you have internet service with a company, a rep may tell you it's the same price a month to add TV to your internet service," Kurland says. "If you take the deal, you'll find there can be $30 or $40 of extra taxes and fees."

STEP 8

Get the details in writing. Once you get a discount you're happy with, ask for confirmation via a follow-up email or text–if possible, before you get off the phone. "You're speaking to a human being, so they may not process your new deal correctly," says Steven McKean at Billshark. Check your bill the next month to make sure your deal went through. If not, you have the evidence to call and have it corrected.

Keep your paperwork together for any future negotiations. "The discount they give you may only last for 12 to 24 months, so mark your calendar, and give them another call a month or so before it expires," Kurland says. At that time, ask a retention specialist if you can keep your current deal or get another one before the provider raises your rate.

STEP 9

Repeat. Use these same steps to lower other bills, such as those for your health club, home alarm company, and pest control service, Kurland says. You can also try similar tactics with your home and car insurance companies. "In the case of home and auto insurance, ask about discounts that you're not taking advantage of," Kurland says. For auto insurance, these can include breaks for getting both your home and auto insurance with one carrier, taking a safe-driving course, and driving less than you used to. And consider raising your deductibles. Increasing your $500 deductible to $1,000 can reduce your overall policy costs by 11 percent, according to Douglas Heller, director of insurance at the Consumer Federation of America.

More possibilities: If you carry credit card balances, call, ask for the retention department, and request a lower interest rate. The company is more likely to do this if you've been with them for several years and typically pay your bills on time. When it comes to energy, in many places you can't shop around for gas or electricity, but the American Coalition of Competitive Energy Suppliers has a list of states that allow you to choose providers, plus links to sites that will help you compare rates (competitiveenergy.org).

My Favorite Save

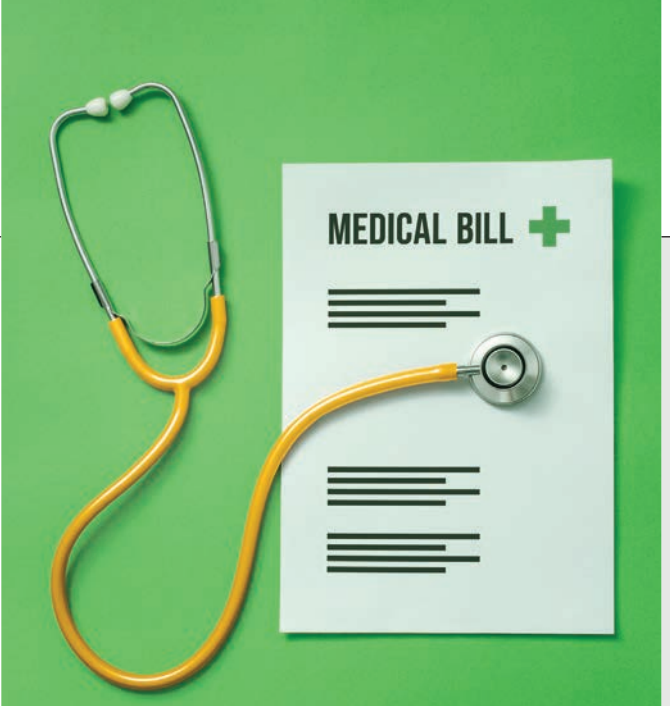
ASKING FOR A PRICE MATCH

I go to stores that price-match, something I initially thought would involve filling out a lot of forms and getting a manager's approval. But it has turned out to be easy. Recently, for instance, I went to Lowe's and showed them on my phone that the air conditioner model I was interested in there was being sold at Home Depot for less. They instantly matched that lower price, and I saved myself time and mileage not driving around trying to find the best deal.

MIKE SMITH
design director

Find and Fix Credit Card Billing Errors

MISTAKES HAPPEN, so check your monthly credit card statements carefully when you receive them. Spot something odd? Call the contact number on your card right away: If the account was hacked, you want to make sure you're not on the hook for big unauthorized charges. (The law limits your responsibility to $50.) For issues that seem less urgent, ask for more information on the questionable charge. It could be legitimate—for instance, where a merchant's name on your statement was so vague that you didn't recognize it. If it's an error, such as a double billing or a charge for an item you never received, card issuers may suggest that you contact the merchant directly to try and solve the problem. Still no satisfaction? Formally dispute the charge. Some card issuers let you do this online, but typically, you'll need to send a letter to the card's billing inquiries address (check your statement) within 60 days of receiving the statement, explaining what you're disputing and why. While your case is being reviewed, you don't have to pay that charge.



SLASH A BIG MEDICAL BILL

ARE YOU DEALING with hefty medical expenses after a hospitalization or multiple appointments with specialists for tests and treatments? You may be able to negotiate a lower bill, experts say. Try the following.

STEP 1

Get a detailed invoice from the hospital or providers. Scan the invoices for any duplicate charges, fees for services you did not receive, or anything that is unclear to you. Then flag anything that seems off. Almost half of all medical bills contain at least one error, according to Caitlin Donovan, a healthcare policy expert at the Patient Advocate Foundation, which helps consumers deal with medical bills.

PHOTO: BEN GOLDSTEIN

GOOD TO KNOW

Stretch Out Your Payments

If it's best for you to pay a medical debt off over time, it's reasonable to ask the billing office to set up a no-interest payment plan for you.

STEP 2

Wait for your EOB. Doctors' offices and hospitals may mail initial bills to you before they even submit them to your health insurer. So hold off on any payment until you receive an explanation of benefits (EOB) from your insurer, digitally or in the mail. This will show what you owe after the insurer has paid its portion.

But note: If your EOB shows that your health insurer is refusing to pay for services that you think should be covered, call the insurer to see whether it's a correctable mistake, such as a coding error for a certain test or treatment. If it's truly a denial of coverage, you may need to file an appeal. There are specific steps for doing this: Find them at healthcare.gov/appeal-insurance-company-decision/appeals.

STEP 3

Mistake or not, seek a discount. There's no harm in calling the hospital's accounting office or the billing staff at your doctor's practice and asking whether they'll reduce your bill. In a 2021 to 2022 survey commissioned by the online loan marketplace Lending Tree, more than 90 percent of respondents with medical debt who tried to negotiate were either partly or fully successful. Or if you have the funds to pay the entire bill, asking the hospital or provider for a "prompt pay" discount for doing so in a timely manner may save you 15 percent or more.

After hospital care, you can also call and ask a billing specialist whether the facility offers financial assistance. According to the American Hospital Association, about half of U.S. hospitals are nonprofit. This means they are required to offer free or discounted services in some instances. This is usually reserved for low- to moderate-income patients who have limited or no health insurance, but requirements vary from hospital to hospital, says Jared Walker, founder of the nonprofit Dollar For, which helps people apply for such help.

STEP 4

Get outside help. If you've gotten nowhere on your own, the Patient Advocate Foundation (patientadvocate.org) may offer free negotiating help. Check to see if you qualify. Or consider hiring a medical billing professional to negotiate for you, but be aware of what the fees may be: These services can cost upward of $100 an hour. You can find potential candidates through the Alliance of Professional Health Advocates (advoconnection.com). Be sure to choose someone who is credentialed by the Patient Advocate Certification Board.

–Lisa Gill

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY DOMENIC BAHMANN

CUT YOUR FOOD AND GAS COSTS

THE HIGH PRICES of these necessities can take an especially large bite out of your budget—but there are some great ways to save.

Find Grocery Deals

STEP 1

Sign up for loyalty cards. "With store loyalty cards you can get special offers and additional savings not available to regular shoppers, and discounts from other retailers, sometimes including gas stations," says Burt Flickinger III, managing director at Strategic Resource Group, a New York retail consulting company.

STEP 2

Check prices beforehand. You probably already scan your favorite stores' weekly sales flyers, but you might also try an independent app. Basket, for instance, lists real-time prices at local grocers as reported by other shoppers. Flipp shows you multiple sales flyers from stores near your ZIP code. And don't forget to peruse sale and regular prices on store-brand items: You can save 20 to 25 percent on store-brand foods and beverages, and 50 percent or more on health and beauty products and paper goods. Plus, Flickinger says, "Most grocery chains have worked with manufacturers over the past few years to really improve the quality of their private-label brands."

STEP 3

Shop on a Wednesday, if you can. That's when stores are both stocked up for the weekend rush and less busy than later in the week. "Seventy percent of a store's business is done Thursday through Sunday, so stores are crowded and shelves get depleted," Flickinger says. No matter which day, shop between 8 a.m. and 10 a.m., if possible. "The night crew will have restocked the store, so all the advertised specials will be on the shelves," he says.

STEP 4

Compare unit prices. The unit price stickers on shelves, which break costs down by ounce, pound, or other weight, can help you determine which product really is the cheapest. (No stickers? Use your phone's calculator or a free unit price calculator app.)

STEP 5

Consider self-checkout. It may make you less likely to make impulse purchases, says consumer finance expert Andrea Woroch: "When you scan your own items, you have to pay attention, notice the price of everything, and decide if you really need each of them." That makes you more likely to stick to your list and avoid last-minute additions to your shopping cart. Online shopping, Woroch says, may also help curb impulse buying.

STEP 6

Pay with a cash-back credit card. Maximize your money-saving by using the card with the highest cash-back grocery rewards. The American Express Blue Cash Preferred card, for instance, has a $95 annual fee, but for the first $6,000 you spend on groceries

FRUGAL FACT

Deal Days

On the last four days of each month, stores cut prices on food they need to sell before the next month.

My Favorite Save

KEEPING PRICEY FOOD FRESHER LONGER

My husband and I go through a pound of nuts and two bags of granola a week. With cashews (our favorite) at $10 a pound and our granola about the same, it adds up. So when they're on sale I buy three times my normal amount. I store the nuts in a cool, dark place so they don't go rancid, and if I have more than I think we'll eat in three months, I put them in the freezer, where they'll last about a year. The granola I buy stays fresh for up to nine months in a kitchen cabinet.

TRISHA CALVO
deputy editor, food and health

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY DOMENIC BAHMANN

Find Hidden Money

ABOUT 1 IN 10 PEOPLE may have unclaimed property—which can be anything that's owed you by a business or government agency and that you haven't collected for a period of time—according to the National Association of Unclaimed Property Administrators. Unclaimed property can range from the contents of a forgotten safe deposit box or bank account to uncashed paychecks. A few simple (and free) web searches can help you find out whether you have property out there you don't know about. Start at unclaimed.org, which will direct you to the unclaimed funds program for your state; search using your name. For multiple states, go to missingmoney.com, which searches for unclaimed property in many states as well as some U.S. territories and Canadian provinces. At usa.gov/unclaimed-money, you'll find help in determining whether you're owed any of a variety of unclaimed items, including pensions from defunct companies, life insurance payouts from Veterans Affairs, tax refunds, and more. Found your name? Steps for claiming your property vary by state and organization.

each year, it returns 6 percent, or $360. For those considering a new card, "I like cards that give you a flat rate, like 2 percent back on all your purchases, so everything you charge earns you money," Woroch says.

PHOTOS, FROM LEFT: JOHN WALSH/CONSUMER REPORTS; JOHN POWERS/CONSUMER REPORTS

Pay Less for Gas

STEP 1

Scope out nearby prices. Smartphone apps, such as AAA, Gas Guru, and Google Gas Station & Fuel Finder, show gas costs at stations in your area. Checking before you fill up could save you 20 to 40 cents per gallon in metropolitan regions, with many stations competing against each other, and 5 to 10 cents per gallon in other locales, says Patrick De Haan, head of petroleum analysis at GasBuddy, a gas price tracking website. The greatest price discrepancies usually take place along state lines, De Haan says, so if you'll be crossing, fill up on the right side. In June, gassing up at a California station would have cost about $2 more per gallon than across the state line in Nevada.

STEP 2

Time fill-ups at warehouse clubs. Filling your tank at warehouse clubs such as Costco may save you up to 20 cents per gallon, De Haan says. But you could face fuel-wasting lines, so go early or late: "Warehouse club stations are often open before the store is and stay open after it closes, so that's the time to go, because lines, if there are any, will be short when the store is closed," De Haan says. Note: You may need to be a member.

STEP 3

Use cash … sometimes. Some stations charge about 5 to 15 cents per gallon less for cash, De Haan says. Before you fill your tank, compare these savings with your credit card's cash-back benefits. Costco's Anywhere Visa card, for example, gives 4 percent back on up to $7,000 in eligible gas each year. That would give you $2.80 in cash back on a $70, 14-gallon purchase. But you'd net only $2.10 off on that amount of gas with a cash discount of 15 cents per gallon. With credit cards from gas companies such as Chevron and Exxon, discounts may range from 3 to 12 cents per gallon.

STEP 4

Reduce your driving speed. CR tests found that slowing from 65 mph to 55 mph improved fuel economy by 6 mpg in an Nissan Altima and 8 mpg in a Toyota RAV4. You can also squeeze more mileage out by driving evenly; removing your roof rack, which can create drag; and keeping tires properly inflated.

My Favorite Save

FINDING TIRE DEALS

I plan my tire purchases in advance so I can wait for manufacturer rebates (often $75 to $100 on a set) and buy from stores that offer free tire rotation. This can typically be a $60 job and should be done every 5,000 to 8,000 miles. Free rotations over the life of the tires can save me hundreds of dollars. I also believe it's worth spending more to buy highly rated tires with long tread life. Tread life, part of CR's testing, helps predict which tires will last longer, so I save money in the long run.

JEFF S. BARTLETT
managing editor, cars

REPAIR, REPLACE, OR BUY USED?

HERE ARE THE BEST cost-cutting steps to take if an appliance, an electronics item, or a car needs fixing, and you're out of warranty and not up for doing it yourself.

STEP 1

Get repair estimates. For electronics, call the tech support number on the manufacturer's website. If you can't find it easily, search online using the company name and "tech support." Explain your issue and ask for an estimate. Then get a second estimate from an independent chain such as uBreakiFix (in 45 states and Washington, D.C.) or a shop that friends or family trust. A note: With many electronics, you may have to use a manufacturer-authorized repair shop. (To make it easier to get products fixed, CR supports right-to-repair legislation. See **CR.org/repairrights**.)

For appliances, get one estimate from an authorized shop (call the manufacturer's tech support line for names) and one from an independent. Chris Zeisler, technical services supervisor at RepairClinic.com, recommends two chains: Mr. Appliance and A&E Factory Service. Or ask family members and friends for recommendations.

If your car needs fixing and you have an idea of what's wrong, CR's Car Repair Assistant (**CR.org/carrepair**) can give you an idea of costs in your area. Otherwise, ask at a trusted independent repair shop, or at a dealership if a safety recall is involved.

STEP 2

Calculate repair vs. replace costs. Check the price of a replacement model, and choose repair only if it costs less than half that–especially if the product is near the end of its life span. For refrigerators, washers, and dryers, average longevity is 10 to 14 years; for dishwashers it's eight to 12 years, Zeisler says. Electronics tend to have a much shorter life span, in part because technology changes so quickly. In fact, if a TV is more than 4 or 5 years old, it might be better to replace it because TV prices drop every year, says Jim Willcox, CR senior electronics editor.

With a vehicle, repairs are the right move, says Jake Fisher, CR's senior director of auto testing: "Say you have a 10-year-old car that needs a $2,500 transmission. You'll likely lose that in depreciation just by driving a new car off the

FRUGAL FACT

Find the Lowest Sale Prices

CR's "Best Time to Buy" calendar can tell you when a wide variety of products are typically at their best prices of the year. Go to CR.org/buy for info on items from printers to bedding.

My Favorite Save

SHOPPING AT AN APPLIANCE OUTLET STORE

After renovating our kitchen, our old black fridge was the only appliance that wasn't stainless steel. My wife and I wanted to replace it, but with a baby on the way, we needed to stick to a budget. At an outlet store that sells new appliances with light cosmetic flaws, we found a higher-end, stainless steel LG model with a barely noticeable dent on the side of the pullout freezer door. It was about half the regular price and had a manufacturer warranty.

DANIEL WROCLAWSKI
home editor

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY DOMENIC BAHMANN

lot." Exceptions include clear safety issues or a vehicle that was in a flood, or if you want newer safety features.

STEP 3

Consider used. Pre-owned appliances can be as much as 75 percent off the retail price of new ones. Zeisler advises buying these from a used-appliance store or a repair shop, where you will typically get a 6-month warranty.

You can get also good deals on refurbished electronics—which were returned to a manufacturer, tested, and repaired, if necessary. It's best to buy these from companies that offer warranties.

If you're shopping for a used car, be aware that those with a "certified pre-owned" designation can cost thousands more than similar vehicles, CR experts say. (Check **CR.org/bestusedcars** for a list of reliable used cars.)

STEP 4

New or used, look for or ask for a discount. In a 2021 survey, two-thirds of the CR members who did so on major appliances succeeded. Tactics that worked best included mentioning better deals elsewhere and buying a display model. Also, check independent retailers, where salespeople can often match big-box store prices and waive delivery or removal fees.

For electronics, you may save money by opting for last year's model, or if you can wait, buying in November or December, when the best deals are usually available. Consider browser extensions such as CNET Shopping and Honey, which track prices at thousands of online stores. Honey also adds coupons or promo codes it finds to items in your cart.

If you can't get a discount, ask whether any other perks are available, such as rebates or free installation for a large appliance. It's a tough time to get a deal on a car, but CR experts say steps like having your old vehicle prepared for trade-in and being ready to act fast may help you obtain attractive manufacturer terms on financing or a lease.

PHOTOS: JOHN WALSH/CONSUMER REPORTS (HEADSHOT); CONSUMER REPORTS (VACUUMS, CARS, SMARTPHONES)

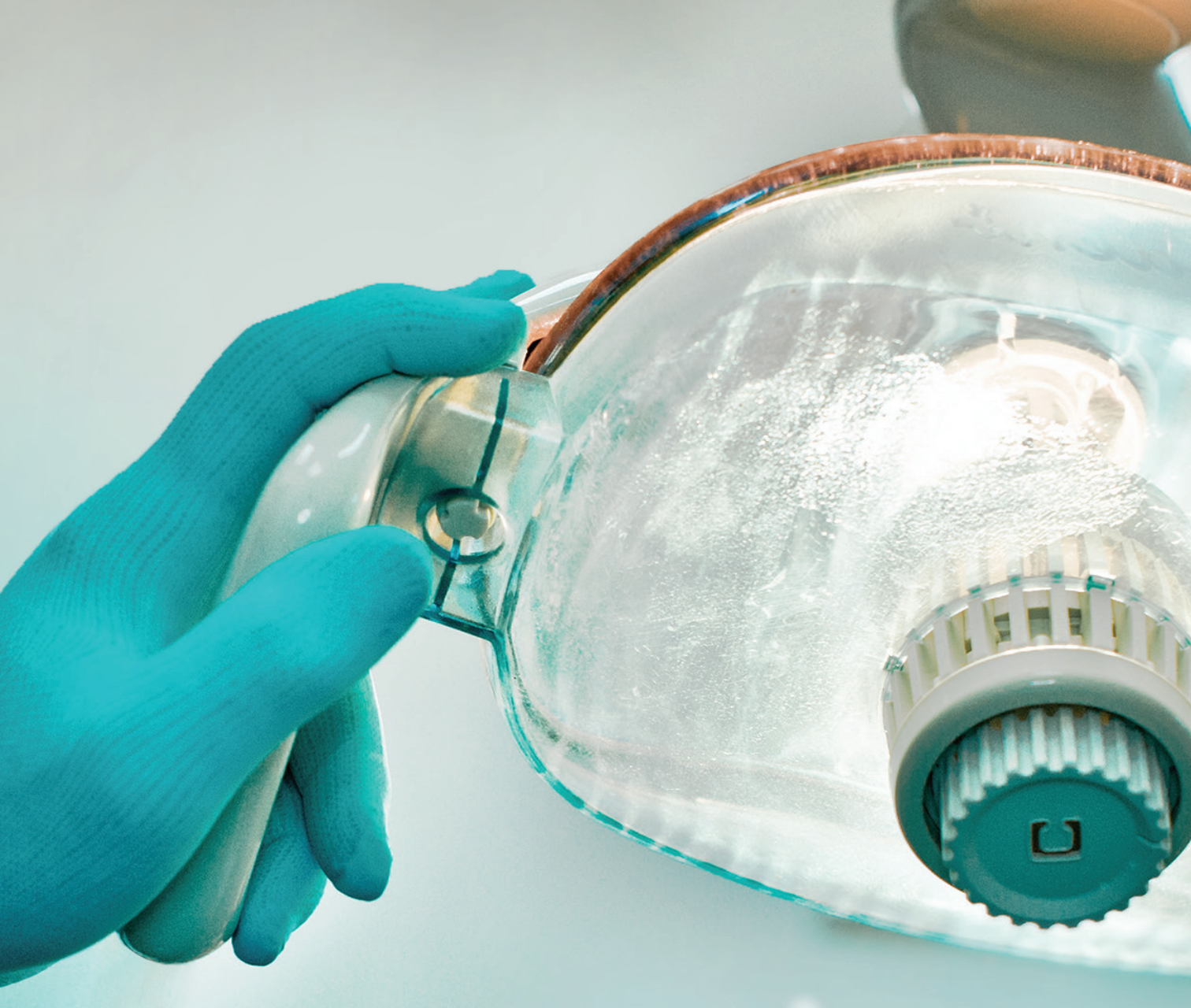
The Better Deal

In some cases, you can spend less and get high-quality products with most of the features you want. Here are a few examples from CR's testing labs.

HIGHER PRICE	BETTER PRICE	THE LOWDOWN
$130 ✓ Bunn HB Heat N' Brew Programmable 83	$30 $ Hamilton Beach 12-Cup Programmable 49465R 83	These coffee brewers are equal in our convenience and carafe handling tests. The Bunn scored higher for reliability and satisfaction in our member survey, but the brew performance of the Hamilton Beach model surpasses Bunn's.
$700 ✓ Miele Dynamic U1 Cat & Dog 76	$280 $ Kenmore Pet Friendly 31140 74	While the Miele gets top marks for carpet cleaning, the Kenmore is close behind, and matches it on cleaning bare floors, sucking up pet hair, and low emissions. And the Kenmore is the better choice if you use tools for cleaning upholstery.
$43,180* ✓ Buick Envision 84	$33,194* ✓ Hyundai Tucson Hybrid 93	The Buick Envision, a top-rated luxury compact SUV, is pleasant to drive. But the similar-sized Hyundai Tucson Hybrid is higher-rated, gets 12 mpg more, costs $10,000 less, and has a much higher owner satisfaction score.
$700 $ Apple iPhone 13 Mini 79	$430 $ Apple iPhone SE 75	Both models feature the well-liked iPhone apps, settings, and iMessage function. The iPhone SE screen is a bit smaller, has Touch ID rather than Face ID, and lacks the iPhone 13's ultrawide lens. But it takes great photos nonetheless.

POOR — EXCELLENT | ✓ RECOMMENDED | $ CR BEST BUY | GREEN CHOICE

*Price as tested.



Do You Really Need That Root Canal, Crown, or Implant?

READ THIS BEFORE YOUR NEXT TRIP TO THE DENTIST.

by Catherine Roberts

WHEN YOU'RE IN THE DENTIST'S chair, being told that you that you need a filling, a crown, a root canal, or some other procedure, should you trust that advice? Or is there another option?

Many factors—apart from what's best for you—may play a role in how some dentists decide what to recommend. Plus, the scientific evidence supporting some dental procedures is often lacking. When it comes to the best way to handle a problem with a tooth, there's a whole lot of gray area.

Plenty of teeth do need dental work, and no repair lasts forever, so a tooth with a filling could require ongoing attention. A small filling may be replaced by a larger filling, the tooth might eventually need a crown and a root canal, and you could finally need to have the tooth taken out, says Alexander Holden, PhD, clinical associate professor of dentistry at the University of Sydney. But when should all these steps occur? Or are they even necessary?

In many cases, there are no hard-and-fast rules. "Even among skilled, ethical dentists, there can be discrepancies in treatment plans," says Olivia Sheridan, DMD, a professor of clinical restorative dentistry at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. Recommendations about many medical treatments come from respected groups that pore over all the evidence. But fewer such guidelines exist for most dental treatments.

In the absence of such data, a dentist can weigh considerations such as a person's age, the shape of their bite, and more. But other influences might sometimes play a role, too.

For example, private-equity-owned dental service organizations may

encourage some dentists to sell people unnecessary treatments to maximize profits. And in a 2020 Canadian study, researchers found that dentists who reported more debt were more likely to recommend more aggressive (and probably more expensive) treatments. Such research shows why people should ask about the benefits, risks, and alternatives of any proposed treatment, says study author Abdulrahman Ghoneim, a dentist and PhD student at the University of Toronto. Yet only 27 percent of Americans have ever gotten a second opinion on a recommended dental treatment or procedure, according to a nationally representative survey of 2,116 adults conducted by CR in March. Here, we take a look at five common procedures to help you figure out if and when you really need them.

CR's Guide to Treatments

Filling Replacement

WHAT IT IS: Fillings, the standard treatment for cavities, eventually wear out. They can be made with materials such as metal or tooth-colored resin, which can crack, or they can decay around the edges. For a replacement filling, the old filling (plus any new decay) is removed, and a new one is placed.

WHEN IT'S NEEDED: The experts we spoke with had a wide range of opinions on when fillings should be replaced vs. simply repaired. Gerald Simmons, BDS, a general dentist in Palmdale, Calif., says he almost always advises replacing the whole filling because the cost to the consumer is the same, and he can ensure that there's no decay underneath the filling that could be missed if it is only repaired. Still, a repair also has potential advantages–it may help preserve more of the tooth's original structure and can be less traumatic for patients. Nathaniel Lawson, PhD, director of the division of biomaterials at the University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Dentistry, says he prefers repairing–if they're fillings he originally performed. The scientific literature is of little help: In 2014, the Cochrane Collaboration, an independent group that reviews evidence about tests and treatments, found that there was insufficient support to determine whether repair or replacement was preferable. Ultimately, you'll need to have a conversation with your dentist about the risks and benefits of each option.

WHEN TO QUESTION IT: Replacing or repairing fillings can be important when they're damaged or there's new decay. But you should push back if a dentist recommends replacing your fillings just because they're old. Age alone shouldn't indicate a need for new fillings, according to the American Dental Association's Choosing Wisely recommendations, which aim to reduce unnecessary care.

WHAT THE ALTERNATIVES ARE: A filling repair involves removing and replacing only the defective part of the filling, rather than the whole filling.

COST OF A FILLING: $104 to $472, depending on material used and the number of sides of the tooth it covers.*

Wisdom Truth
If it's not urgent, consider getting a second opinion before having a wisdom tooth removed.

Crown

WHAT IT IS: A crown is a tooth-shaped cap that replaces part of your natural tooth above your gumline. To place one, a dentist removes some of the tooth's outer material and cements the crown on top of your remaining tooth. "We use a crown to restore a tooth to its original shape and size," says Edmond R. Hewlett, DDS, consumer adviser

PHOTO, PREVIOUS SPREAD: STEFANO OPPO/GETTY IMAGES. PHOTO, THIS PAGE: GETTY IMAGES

for the American Dental Association and a professor at the UCLA School of Dentistry in Los Angeles.

WHEN IT'S NEEDED: A crown is meant to reinforce a tooth whose structure has been weakened by other dental work or decay. If you've had a root canal on a molar, for example, you need a crown on the tooth too, because you need strong molars for chewing. (A crown may be optional for nonmolars with root canals.)

WHEN TO QUESTION IT: The decision can be subjective. For some people, preserving their natural tooth structure is most important; others, such as those who have a forceful bite or who grind their teeth, may benefit more from the added strength of a crown. Crowns are expensive, so it's always reasonable to ask for options.

WHAT THE ALTERNATIVES ARE: A larger filling may work instead of a crown in some cases, according to Simmons, who says he tries to use this approach when he can because the natural tooth surface will be less prone to collecting plaque than the crown (particularly at its edge). On the other hand, crowns tend to have a longer life than fillings. Dentists also have the option of using a partial crown, known as an onlay, which caps only part of the tooth. This preserves more of the tooth's natural structure, but it is somewhat more complicated to perform because it must be bonded to the tooth. Your dentist might not routinely do them, and insurance might not cover it. Still, Lawson calls onlays "a great conservative option."

COST OF A CROWN: $400 to $1,698, depending on the materials and how much of the tooth is covered.*

Root Canal

WHAT IT IS: Deep cavities, extensive or repeated dental procedures, or trauma to the tooth can leave a tooth's soft insides, or pulp, inflamed and eventually infected. During a root canal, a provider drills into the root of your tooth to remove infected, necrotic (dead) pulp in the center of your tooth. The inside of the canal is cleaned, disinfected, filled, and sealed.

WHEN IT'S NEEDED: The pulp contains a tooth's nerves, and once that tissue has begun to decay, there's no option but to take it out, Simmons says. Otherwise, the infection can spread to other parts of the body. Although it's rare now, before the advent of antibiotics untreated infected tooth pulp could sometimes be fatal.

WHEN TO QUESTION IT: It's important that your dentist perform adequate testing to determine that your tooth's pulp is necrotic and not salvageable, because some people who need root canals don't experience pain as a symptom. Testing may include X-ray imaging, and your dentist should do a sensitivity test, such as placing something cold against the suspect tooth and assessing your reaction. If you can't feel the cold at all, the tooth is probably dead and needs a root canal, Lawson says. Significant or extreme pain is also a concerning sign. A few seconds of pain, however, may mean that the tooth's pulp is inflamed but not irreversibly so. (If the tooth is crowned, a temperature-based test might be less effective.) The dentist should also place the cold object against one of your other teeth for comparison.

WHAT THE ALTERNATIVES ARE: For a tooth that definitely needs a root canal, the only alternative is to extract the tooth (and potentially place an implant). But for a tooth that has reversible inflammation (known as reversible pulpitis), a filling plus a pulp cap–a much less expensive procedure in which pulp exposed by drilling is covered with protective material–can suffice, Lawson says. But keep in mind that this option isn't always successful. If consumers go with that choice, he says, "they have to assume the risk that they might continue to hurt

Dental Specialists 101

A **general practice dentist** is a good place to start for many tooth-related problems. If you have a problem that your regular dentist can't address, they're likely to refer you to a specialist. These professionals have the same basic training as general dentists, plus additional years of education in their specialty field.

- **Endodontists** focus on problems inside your teeth and are especially skilled at performing root canals. (The American Association of Endodontists says an endodontist may do as many as 25 root canals per week.)
- **Periodontists** diagnose and treat periodontal (gum) disease, which affects the gum and the bone tissue surrounding teeth.
- **Oral and maxillofacial surgeons** specialize in surgical treatment of injuries or other problems of the head, neck, and jaw. Extraction of wisdom teeth and placing of implants are two common procedures for oral surgeons.
- **Prosthodontists** specialize in dental prosthetics, including implants, dentures, and bridges.
- **Orthodontists** use braces, retainers, and other techniques to treat misaligned teeth and jaws, and problems with your bite.

***Source:** American Dental Association, Health Policy Institute, 2020 Survey of Dental Fees. Average total price before insurance.

because it didn't work, and they might be paying for two treatments."

COST OF ROOT CANAL TREATMENT: $620 to $1,472, depending on whether it's a molar, premolar, or front tooth. A crown, if needed, will add to the cost.*

Extraction and Implant

WHAT IT IS: When an infected, cracked, or decayed tooth can't be fixed with a filling, crown, or root canal, sometimes it has to be pulled. An implant, a medical device surgically implanted into your jaw to support a crown, is one common treatment for replacing the tooth with a prosthetic. The procedure generally involves a surgery of several hours to place the implant in your jaw, and then months waiting for the surgery site to heal before the artificial tooth is placed on top of the implant.

WHEN IT'S NEEDED: Some types of severe fractures can't be repaired with a root canal or crown, so extraction is the only solution. And sometimes the tooth has too much decay or damage to save it. According to Lawson at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, "if the decay goes below the level of the bone, then we can't get rid of it all and have enough tooth structure to hold a crown on with." That's when it's better to remove the tooth.

WHEN TO QUESTION IT: Whether a tooth can be restored or needs to be fully removed can be highly subjective, but usually extraction should be the last resort–after fillings, a crown, and possibly a root canal. "If you start skipping paths on that journey, you'll reach the part where you lose the tooth sooner," says the University of Sydney's Holden. So if a dentist is recommending extraction and has skipped one or more of those steps, it's reasonable to ask whether there are ways to extend the life of the tooth instead.

One type of extraction you may want to think twice about if you're not in pain: removal of wisdom teeth. Millions of people have their third molars, or wisdom teeth, removed every year, even in the absence of pain or infection. But a 2020 analysis by the Cochrane Collaboration concluded that the available evidence was insufficient to be able to say whether asymptomatic, disease-free wisdom teeth should be routinely removed.

WHAT THE ALTERNATIVES ARE: Fillings, crowns, and root canals are all procedures that can help preserve your natural tooth. There's also a procedure called crown lengthening that can be used to expose more of your tooth's surface, which can make a crown a possibility. The challenge, however, is figuring out whether multiple procedures–a root canal, plus crown lengthening, plus a crown–are really worth all the time, effort, and cost. If you have "a weak tooth that requires a lot of procedures just to keep it there ... taking it out and replacing with an implant is very commonly preferable," says UCLA's Hewlett. Still, Sheridan says, implants require scrupulous oral hygiene to maintain and might not be the right choice for people with certain types of bites. Bridges and dentures are also alternatives to implants, as

Paying for Dental Care

Dental costs can be high—even if you have insurance. "Dental insurance, even at its best, is a fee-reduction service," says Olivia Sheridan, DMD, a professor of clinical restorative dentistry at the University of Pennsylvania. "You have copays, and you have a yearly maximum that is embarrassingly small." Delta Dental insurance, for example, says its yearly maximums are between $1,000 and $2,000. But there are ways to save.

- **Find coverage.** Sign up for an employer-subsidized dental plan if you have the chance. Some state Medicaid programs cover dental care for adults. Medicare doesn't cover dental care, but some Medicare Advantage plans do.
- **Consider a dental savings plan.** These are similar to buying club memberships: You pay an annual fee and gain access to a large network of dentists who offer discounts. Fees range from about $80 to $200 per year, for discounts of 10 to 60 percent off various procedures. Search for one in your area at DentalPlans.com.
- **Get care at a dental school.** Services performed by dentists or hygienists in training will often take longer because the students will be supervised by faculty members. But schools offer care at lower costs. Pueblo Community College's Dental Hygiene Clinic in Colorado, for example, charges $30 for an exam and cleaning. Find an accredited school at coda.ada.org/en/find-a-program.
- **Try a community health center.** Some of these are federally funded and may provide free or low-cost care. Look for one in your area at findahealthcenter.hrsa.gov.
- **Plan your treatment wisely.** If you need a lot of work, talk with your dentist about scheduling it to make optimal use of your dental insurance, Sheridan says. Two expensive procedures can sometimes be scheduled in different calendar years, for example.

***Source:** American Dental Association, Health Policy Institute, 2020 Survey of Dental Fees. Average total price before insurance.

is simply not replacing the tooth.
COST OF AN IMPLANT: $3,080 to $5,825, including the placing of the implant, crown, and metal connector.*

Custom Night Guard

WHAT IT IS: A night guard can protect your teeth while you sleep if you have bruxism–unconscious grinding and clenching of your teeth. Night guards made by dentists are fit to your bite by taking an impression of your teeth.
WHEN IT'S NEEDED: Teeth grinding can lead to chipped or cracked teeth, pain, and other problems, and night guards can provide protection. Simmons, the general dentist in Palmdale, Calif., says he also sometimes recommends one for patients who have porcelain crowns because a night guard can help protect repaired teeth from breakage.
WHEN TO QUESTION IT: Generally, if you don't grind and clench your teeth, you don't need a night guard. But diagnosing bruxism can be tricky without a sleep study, says Geoffrey Gerstner, PhD, associate professor of dentistry at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, and sleep studies can be expensive and inconvenient. Two typical signs are visible wear on the teeth and reports from your sleeping partner that you're grinding.
WHAT THE ALTERNATIVES ARE: Over-the-counter night guards are available. Some require you to perform a fit procedure at home, and some are one-size-fits-all. These are generally fine for a week or so if you need immediate relief, but they should not be used long-term, Sheridan says. A guard that doesn't fit could cause your teeth to become misaligned, Gerstner says. The self-customizable OTC options don't appear to solve this problem. In Gerstner's 2020 study of such night guards, only four out of 31 participants were able to craft their guards with acceptable quality–and most of them were dental students.
COST FOR A BITE/NIGHT GUARD: $324 to $788.*

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

How to Say No to Your Dentist

Given all the room for interpretation between necessary and unnecessary care, saying no, or at least "not right now," can be useful. Here's how.

Ask Good Questions

"The doctor is obliged to explain the risks, the benefits of the procedure being discussed, as well as any alternative, and make sure that all of your questions are answered," says Edmond Hewlett, DDS, consumer adviser for the American Dental Association (ADA) and a professor at the UCLA School of Dentistry. Along with asking about risks, benefits, and alternatives, Olivia Sheridan, DMD, a professor of clinical restorative dentistry at the University of Pennsylvania, recommends asking what will happen if you do nothing. You should also ask about the expected life span of the work, says Alexander Holden, PhD, a clinical associate professor at the University of Sydney.

Watch for Red Flags

When you ask why your dentist has recommended a procedure, they should explain their medical reasoning. Proceed with caution if they won't do so, or if a treatment plan seems out of the ordinary—if, for example, you've rarely needed anything and then suddenly need work costing $10,000, says Gerald Simmons, BDS, a general dentist in Palmdale, Calif.

Get a Second Opinion

A trustworthy dentist shouldn't be offended by this. "If somebody wants a second opinion, that would not hurt my feelings," says Nathaniel Lawson, PhD, a general dentist and the director of the division of biomaterials at the University of Alabama at Birmingham School of Dentistry. In CR's nationally representative survey, we found that about 4 in 10 people who got a second opinion about a dental procedure ended up not having the procedure, postponing it, or having a different procedure. To find a dentist for a second opinion, ask friends and family members, or search for a specialist using the ADA's tool at findadentist.ada.org. Ask for copies of your X-rays to give to the second dentist, Lawson says. If your dentist refuses to or is reluctant to provide your records, that's another red flag. When you ask for a second opinion, Lawson recommends, you should refrain from explaining what the first opinion was, so the new dentist can look at your mouth and X-rays without any preconceived notions.

Make Your Decision

Be sure to ask both the first and second dentists you consult why they're recommending a particular treatment. If the two opinions diverge, you can decide which path to take based on which provider best aligns with your preferences, Holden says—be it a more aggressive proactive approach to try to prevent future problems, or a more conservative approach of doing only what's necessary at the moment.

THE NEW RULES FOR FIRE SAFETY

HOUSE FIRES TODAY BURN FASTER AND HOTTER, AND ARE MORE DEADLY THAN EVER. HERE'S HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF AND YOUR FAMILY.

BY JESSE WILL

THE NUMBER of house fires reported in the U.S. has dropped by half since 1980, according to the National Fire Protection Association. Credit the proliferation of smoke alarms, public education, and better building codes.

Yet look beyond that number and the full story isn't as rosy: Fire deaths in this country have been rising since 2010, according to the U.S. Fire Administration, a division of the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

"Clearly, we're trending in the wrong direction," says Steve Kerber, PhD, executive director of the Fire Safety Research Institute, a nonprofit that focuses on fire safety. Home "is where people should feel the safest," he says, but "it's getting less and less safe."

One main reason: time. There's not enough of it. In a house fire 40 years ago, occupants had 17 minutes to evacuate. Now it's just 3.

One problem is the popularity of the open-plan house, which allows fires to travel faster and more freely.

Synthetic materials are another culprit. Our furnishings are more likely to include synthetic materials instead of cotton or wool, and plastic or particleboard rather than solid wood. These burn quicker and release heat faster, and can create toxic gases that could incapacitate you before you even realize there's a fire.

People think, "I can get my keys, I can get my clothes," Kerber says. They "think they can crawl right under the smoke." But these fires aren't like that: They spread fast and create dark smoke that quickly falls to the ground.

And the threat of fire isn't just growing from the inside. More homeowners are confronting the possibility of their home being engulfed in a wildfire. Droughts and high temperatures due to climate change are two reasons. Sprawl is another, as homes spring up in areas that were once wildlands.

But don't fear: It's time to be smart about fire, not scared

PHOTO: YASU + JUNKO/TRUNK ARCHIVE

SAFETY TIP

Never open the door during an oven fire. Keep it closed and turn off the oven.

of it. We have better technology than ever to keep you safe. Here are some ways to keep your house from going up in flames.

GET SMARTER ABOUT LITHIUM-ION BATTERIES

Increasingly, lithium-ion batteries in devices such as e-bikes, e-scooters, and hoverboards have become the ignition source of catastrophic fires. Firefighters in New York City last year responded to at least 75 such fires, which were responsible for 72 injuries and three deaths.

The fires start while charging: A defective lithium-ion battery can overheat, triggering a chemical reaction. And a battery in "thermal runaway" creates its own oxygen, so flames can't be put out with water.

Some tips on preventing lithium-ion battery fires caused by e-bikes and other ion battery-operated devices:

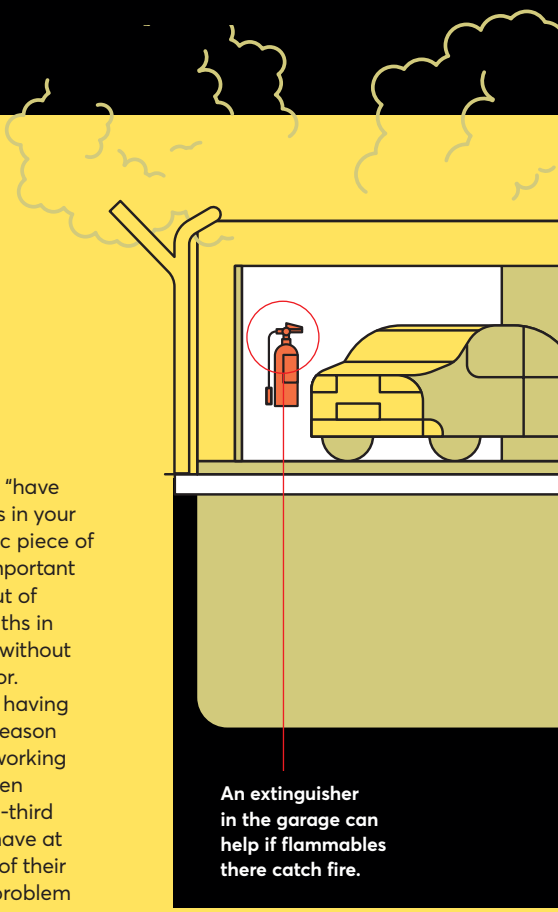
- **Buy an e-bike, an e-scooter, a hoverboard, or a similar device** that has been certified by UL Solutions, an independent testing organization.
- **Use the charger that came with your device.** A replacement that fits the plug but doesn't match the charging speed or amperage risks an explosion or a fire.
- **Try not to charge devices overnight.** Do not leave batteries for tools perpetually charging in the garage or basement.
- **Don't charge electric cars with an extension cord or use a multiplug adapter.** Rather, plug the charging cord that came with the car directly into a wall outlet. For a much faster charge, consider having a charging unit professionally installed.

STAND BY YOUR PAN

Almost half of home fires are caused by cooking. "Walking away from that stove is still a prevalent cause," says Bruce

Fire Safety Essentials

YOUR HOME SHOULD BE EQUIPPED WITH SMOKE DETECTORS AND FIRE EXTINGUISHERS—THE CRITICAL TOOLS OF PREPAREDNESS



An extinguisher in the garage can help if flammables there catch fire.

Upgrade Your Smoke Detectors

Of all the fire safety tips, "have working smoke detectors in your home" is the most classic piece of advice—and the most important one to heed. Almost 3 out of 5 home-fire-related deaths in the U.S. occur in houses without a working smoke detector.

Apart from simply not having them installed, a major reason a home doesn't have a working detector is that it has been deactivated. Almost one-third of Americans said they have at least once disabled one of their detectors because of a problem they had with it, according to a nationally representative Consumer Reports survey of 2,335 U.S. adults conducted in March 2021.

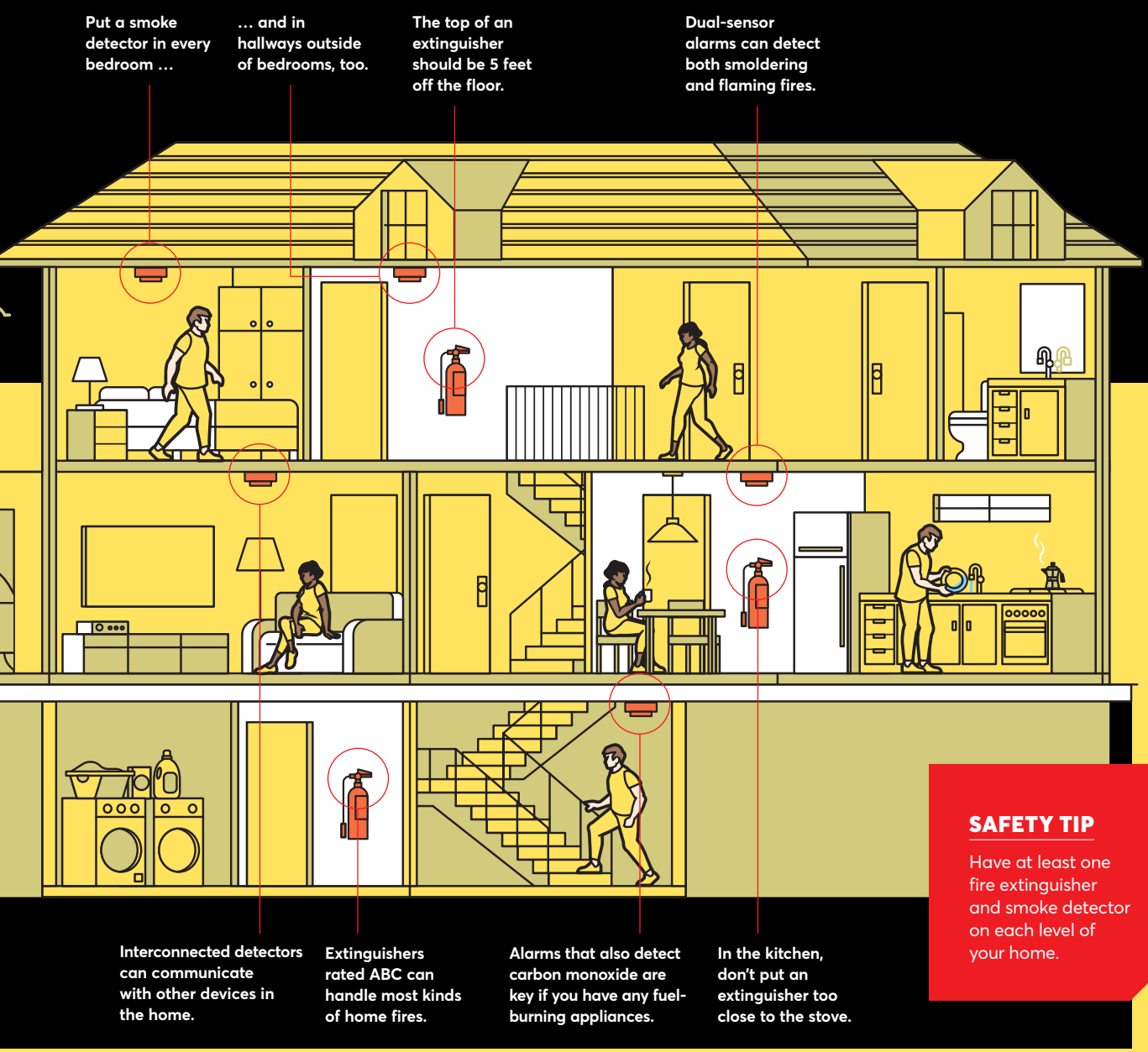
When faced with a chirping low-battery warning or annoyed by a false alarm from overcooking a pork chop, people often take a detector down and throw it in a drawer, or remove its batteries and never replace them.

This year, UL Standards & Engagement, a standards certifying organization, is changing its smoke alarm standards, with a number of the updates designed to make those nuisance alarms less common. "This is the most radical change since smoke alarms were invented," says Steve Kerber at the Fire Safety Research Institute.

The new alarms will have finely tuned sensors that can detect both flaming and smoldering fires, and can help avoid nuisance alarms. They will give extra leeway if they detect smoke from a burger but are more sensitive to other fires—for example, if they detect that a synthetic couch is smoldering.

Manufacturers producing smoke alarms must build them to the "UL 217 8th Edition" standard by June 30, 2024, but the first of these detectors may be arriving in stores in coming months. (Look for "Helps reduce cooking nuisance alarms" on the label.)

If you don't have time to wait for the new smoke detectors, consider buying one of CR's picks for dual-


Put a smoke detector in every bedroom …
… and in hallways outside of bedrooms, too.
The top of an extinguisher should be 5 feet off the floor.
Dual-sensor alarms can detect both smoldering and flaming fires.
Interconnected detectors can communicate with other devices in the home.
Extinguishers rated ABC can handle most kinds of home fires.
Alarms that also detect carbon monoxide are key if you have any fuel-burning appliances.
In the kitchen, don't put an extinguisher too close to the stove.

SAFETY TIP

Have at least one fire extinguisher and smoke detector on each level of your home.

sensor alarms, which excel at detecting both flaming and smoldering fires (see "The Best Smoke Detectors," on page 44).

- **Where to put them:** At least one on every level of your home, including the basement. Also put them in hallways, especially outside bedrooms, and in each sleeping area. Bedroom alarms are critical if people sleep with their doors closed—which is a good idea because that helps keep fires from spreading.
- **When to change them:** Every 10 years. (CR's survey found that 53 percent of people could not recall when they had last changed their detector.)
- **When to test them:** Monthly.

Replace Your Fire Extinguishers

Last year, CR enrolled 68 of our members—all owners of fire extinguishers—in a research study to examine and test the extinguishers in their homes.

We found that many people might not realize how old their devices are. Almost half of the extinguishers were 20 or more years old, though those devices typically have a life span of only 12 years.

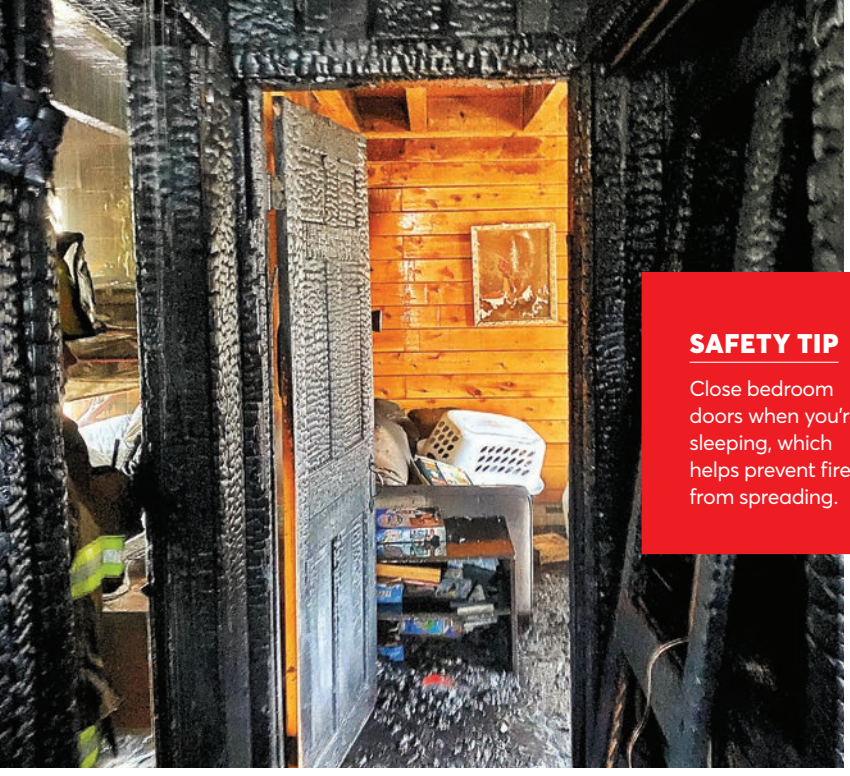
Eighteen participants also noted at least one visible problem with their extinguisher, such as low pressure readings, rust, scratches, or dents. Three of these participants said there was some kind of issue with the pull-pin.

The good news: Of the 60 participants who tried to discharge their extinguishers, only three found that they failed to let out any extinguishing agent.

Here's what you need to know about buying and using extinguishers:

- **Have at least one extinguisher rated "ABC" per floor.** That means it's designed to handle most small home fires, including those from wood, paper, or flammable liquids, as well as electrical fires. Don't forget to put one in your basement and garage.
- **In the kitchen, have one near but not next to your stove.** Smoke or fire from the appliance could block access to the device. Also, avoid storing it under a sink: Moisture could damage it. One with just a B on its label is okay because it will work on oil and grease fires.
- **Get the largest extinguisher you can safely handle.** Five to 10 pounds is common.
- **If you need to deploy your extinguisher, use the PASS method.** With your back to an exit, **P**ull the pin, **A**im the nozzle toward the base of the fire, **S**queeze the trigger, and **S**weep from side to side.

ILLUSTRATION: RODRIGO DAMATI



SAFETY TIP

Close bedroom doors when you're sleeping, which helps prevent fires from spreading.

Bouch, a fire program specialist at the U.S. Fire Administration. Kitchen fires are especially common on holidays and late at night; alcohol is often involved. A flaming pan may ignite a particle-board cabinet, causing a bigger blaze. Injuries can happen if you move a burning pan to the sink or throw water on it, which creates a steam explosion. Instead, cover it with a lid or baking sheet. For oven fires, keep the door closed, shut off the oven controls, and grab an extinguisher in case you need it.

MIND YOUR AGING HOUSE

If you own an older home, you might have an outlet or two that don't "grip" the plug of, say, your vacuum. This can introduce the possibility of an arc fault, where an intermittent contact from that loose plug can cause heat or a spark, and, potentially, a fire.

Arc-fault circuit interrupter (AFCI) outlets are designed to prevent these faulty connections from creating fires. AFCI outlets are now required in most remodels and new construction, and differ from ground-fault circuit interrupters (GFCI), which are designed to protect against electrical shock in places where moisture might be present. (You can buy outlets that combine both.) It's wise to replace worn-out outlets with AFCI or combination units.

Even better, get an AFCI-GFCI circuit breaker, says David Shapiro, author of "Old Electrical Wiring." If you're looking to buy an old home, have a master electrician take a look. He says that when investors quickly buy and flip a house, electrical systems are often an afterthought.

NEW HOUSE? CONSIDER SPRINKLERS.

Having a home sprinkler system is like having an instant firefighter: In homes with sprinklers, deaths from fires are cut by almost 90 percent and injuries by nearly 30 percent, according to the NFPA. In Maryland, California, and Washington, D.C., sprinkler systems are mandated for all new one- and two-family homes. Why aren't they required everywhere? One reason may be that home builders in many states have lobbied against them, according to a 2016 ProPublica investigation. The NFPA says 29 states have passed laws prohibiting sprinkler mandates in one- and two-family homes.

ASSESS YOUR WILDFIRE RISK

A recent report from the First Street Foundation, a nonprofit that studies climate-change risk, shows that more than 100,000 homes in California currently face a 1 percent or higher annual likelihood of being affected by wildfire; the report estimates that that figure will increase sixfold by 2052.

California is not alone. Hotter, drier weather caused by climate change in many parts of the country is making the risk of wildfires higher than ever, says Jeff Shapiro, a fire protection engineer based in Austin, Texas.

PHOTO, TOP LEFT: JEFFERSON TOWNSHIP VOLUNTEER FIRE COMPANY, LACKAWANNA COUNTY, PA.

The Best Smoke Detectors

CR recommends dual-sensor alarms, which detect both flaming and smoldering fires.

First Alert 3120B $30

91	OVERALL SCORE
5/5	FLAMING FIRES
5/5	SMOLDERING FIRES

Kidde PI2010 $35

91	OVERALL SCORE
5/5	FLAMING FIRES
5/5	SMOLDERING FIRES

First Alert Ultimate Protection SA3210* $50

87	OVERALL SCORE
5/5	FLAMING FIRES
5/5	SMOLDERING FIRES

First Alert SA320CN $23

87	OVERALL SCORE
5/5	FLAMING FIRES
5/5	SMOLDERING FIRES

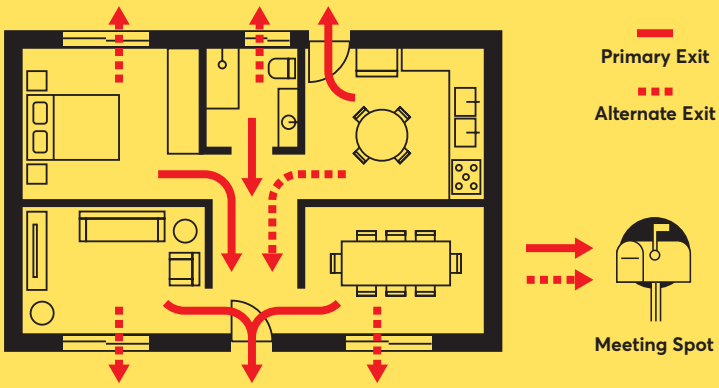
*Battery-powered version.

More homes are also at risk as home builders push from suburbia into the fringes, creating more wildland urban interfaces, or WUIs, in states such as California, Colorado, Oregon, Texas, Utah, and Washington.

And fire isn't just a concern for those with homes abutting wilderness, because flying embers can set fire to structures over a mile away. Many homes lost to wildfire are lost to a firebrand–an ember physically touching the house, says Douglas Kent, author of "Firescaping."

- **Research your risk.** Find maps at wildfirerisk.org and firewise.org. Some states, such as California, host their own websites.
- **Check the fire rating of your roof.** When reroofing, consider using a Class A material, the highest in fire resistance. (Most asphalt shingles are Class A.)
- **Defend the "ignition" zone.** If you're in an area at risk, the 5 feet around your home should be free of mulch and other combustible materials.
- **Remove debris.** Firebrands tend to ignite dried debris on the roof; dead vegetation under decks can provide fuel for a fire. Clear these areas regularly.
- **Have an evacuation plan.** Practice leaving your neighborhood via at least two routes. Take a video with an inventory of your home to make insurance claims easier to process. Discuss how to handle pets. And create a go bag (see at right).

ILLUSTRATION: RODRIGO DAMATI



Rehearse Your Escape Plan

Having an exit plan for when a fire occurs has been a part of safety planning for what seems like forever. You probably drew a map of your house, and its exits, in grade school. But some experts say that drawing up a plan isn't as important as doing a dry run with your family or anyone else you live with.

"Having a map of what you're going to do and where you're going to go is not as important as simply practicing what you're going to do," says Jeff Shapiro, a fire protection engineer based in Austin, Texas.

By running through your plan, you might find things you need to address, such as windows painted shut. And you're trying to develop a muscle memory of "if there's a fire, this is what I have to do," Shapiro says.

- **Develop plans A, B, and C.** Walk through your rooms and identify all your possible exits. **Plan A:** You walk through the door as usual. **Plan B:** You're blocked. Where's a window, and does it open? Are you on the second floor? Ideally, have an escape ladder for every second-floor room. **Plan C:** This is for when you're trapped. Close the door and call for help.
- **Set a meeting place.** Pick a safe spot nearby: a mailbox, tree, or neighbor's porch.
- **Talk about how you'd handle a pet.** Who in your home would be in charge of grabbing Spot? And if a wildfire endangered your neighborhood while you were away, would there be a neighbor who could pick up your pet?
- **Make sure kids know the plan.** Check that the kids know to dial 9-1-1 in an emergency, and be sure they've memorized your address.
- **Close before you doze.** Keeping this catchphrase in mind, and shutting your bedroom doors at night, can give you valuable minutes to escape before heat and fumes enter.

Get Your Go Bag Ready

Wildfire can spread incredibly fast—up to almost 15 mph. So it's essential to be ready to move quickly if your home is threatened. Put together a go bag—a duffel somewhere easily accessible, such as near your bed, with a few essentials, listed at right. And make sure you have scanned copies of all important documents, including vaccination records, available in cloud storage.

CONSIDER INCLUDING:

- Battery- or crank-powered radio
- Flashlight or headlamp with batteries
- Energy bars
- Water bottle
- Shoes
- Whistle
- Phone charger
- N95 masks
- Prescription medications

Universal Security Instruments AMIB3051SC $35

87 OVERALL SCORE
5/5 FLAMING FIRES
5/5 SMOLDERING FIRES

Kidde PI9010 $25

87 OVERALL SCORE
5/5 FLAMING FIRES
5/5 SMOLDERING FIRES

POOR — EXCELLENT | RECOMMENDED

THE BEST CHEF'S KNIFE FOR YOU

AND HOW TO USE IT LIKE A PRO

With the right one, plus our handy chopping guide, you can cut anything perfectly and safely. **BY PAUL HOPE**

PHOTOGRAPH BY BEN GOLDSTEIN

JULIA CHILD ONCE said that she had enough knives to outfit a pirate ship, but she mostly depended on just three of them. And at the top of that short list was a well-sharpened chef's knife.

That's not surprising, given that the chef's knife is the cornerstone of cutlery, a tool designed to tackle everything from finely mincing parsley to deboning a chicken. And a good one lasts for decades. "A chef's knife can really do about 95 percent of your cutting in the kitchen," says Branden Lewis, a chef who's also a professor of culinary arts at Johnson & Wales University in Providence, R.I.

An 8-inch chef's knife is the most common size, and in culinary circles it's seen as hitting a sweet spot: substantial enough to cut through big roasts but not so long that it can't handle delicate tasks like slicing a tomato.

A quick online search yields hundreds of chef's knives, ranging anywhere from $10 to $1,000 or more, many with cool-sounding features like "full-tang" construction (when a single piece of metal runs from the tip of the knife to the butt), high-carbon steel, and triple-riveted handles, to name a few.

So how to pick one that will make cooking not just easier but also help you feel like a pro at slicing and dicing? We've pieced together all the guidance you need, including tips on how to select the right knife for you, a close look at the pros and cons of eight popular chef's knives, a guide to proper (and safe) knife use and maintenance, and even some advice on selecting a cutting board.

HOW TO SHOP FOR A KNIFE

A chef's knife worthy of a prime place in your kitchen will effortlessly transmit force from arm to blade and feel comfortable and secure in your hand, even after extended use. Here: Three strategies for finding the right knife for you, plus eight different 8-inch chef's knives we evaluated.*

FORGET THE PERIODIC TABLE

Lots of knife makers trumpet their use of rare or premium metals like molybdenum and vanadium. But fear not if you bombed high school chemistry: The only term you really need to know is "high-carbon stainless steel," which is a mix of high-carbon steel and stainless steel. "This is the best blend for most home cooks," Lewis says. "You get the easy maintenance of stainless steel, which won't rust, but the benefits of carbon steel, which allows for a sharper edge." As for handle materials, synthetic and plastic are durable but tend to be the most slippery. If that's an issue for you, consider a knife with a metal handle and dimples (like the Global Classic, on the facing page) or one with a wood handle.

TRY BEFORE YOU BUY

One big conclusion from our testing is that people have different notions about how a knife feels in their hand. Dana Keester, our ergonomics expert, says this can affect everything from cramping to pressure points. So expect to experiment before finding a perfect fit. Shop at a store where you can try before you buy, or one with a generous return policy so you can test a knife you buy at home. "Skip options with preformed grooves in the handle or specific spots to place your fingers or thumb," Keester says. "These rarely provide a comfortable grip."

CONSIDER THE BENEFITS OF A PRICIER KNIFE

Though CR's favorite knife costs only about $40, you may find you prefer a pricier one. In general, what you get for more money is a higher ratio of carbon steel to stainless steel. Those knives tend to have softer blades, which means more frequent sharpening. But if you maintain yours with consistency, you'll come to value the benefits of a razor-sharp blade. A higher price is also more likely to get you a lifetime warranty or a commitment by the manufacturer to repair or sharpen your knife (often for a modest fee) if you send it in. "A family member chipped the tip of my Shun knife and I was able to mail it in for a repair," Lewis says, referring to a Japanese cutlery brand. "They ground it down and reformed the edge, and it was as good as new."

GREAT FOR EVERYONE

Henckels Premio 8-inch

$40

This knife combines a razor-sharp blade with a comfortable handle and weight. The result is a tool with the heft to plow through sweet potatoes and onions but that's light enough to finely mince piles of parsley without tiring your hand. Our ergonomics expert deemed it the best chef's knife of the eight we tested if you're buying one sight unseen, because it's the one most likely to suit a cross section of users.

DEBONING PICK

Wüsthof Classic 8-inch

$150

For those who favor old-school design, the Wüsthof Classic has seen only modest changes to its construction in the more than 200 years since the company originated. Like most traditional German knives, the Wüsthof provides serious heft—it's among the heaviest options here—with a blade forged from a single piece of high-carbon stainless steel. The weight helps with heavy tasks like cutting up a chicken, but it can also make the knife feel imbalanced depending on how you grip it.

PHOTO, PREVIOUS SPREAD: PROP STYLING: MIAKO KATOH; FOOD STYLING: JAMIE KIMM. PHOTOS, THIS SPREAD: JOHN WALSH/CONSUMER REPORTS

*Four testers and CR's in-house ergonomics expert scored each knife on 14 factors, and the writer, a trained chef, used each of the knives in his own kitchen to prep foods ranging from produce to poultry.

BUDGET BUY

KitchenAid Classic 8-inch Triple Rivet

$35 for a three-knife set

A standout for the money, this knife clearly took design cues from traditional European knives like the Wüsthof. Some panelists felt its handle caused cramping, but it's hard to get nitpicky about such an inexpensive knife that tackles the basics with ease. One caveat: The very hard stainless steel blade may be difficult to sharpen once the factory edge becomes dull. Though recently discontinued, the knife is still available as part of a three-knife bundle.

EASY TO HANDLE

Global Classic 8-inch

$125

This model features a Japanese-style blade, which is both thinner and lighter than European-style knives. It was a standout in our evaluation and may be especially suited to cooks who favor a pinch grip, where you grab the top of the blade with your thumb and index finger (see "How to Use a Knife," on page 50). It offered excellent force transmission, plowing through a variety of produce with ease, and testers noted that it resisted slipping, likely a result of the dimples in the metal handle.

A DECENT SLICER

Mercer Culinary Renaissance 8-inch

$55

This relatively inexpensive full-tang knife with the look of traditional German cutlery chops effectively and received mostly positive remarks from our panelists. Those who grip knives farther back on the handle did find it unbalanced, and one complained that the handle design created a pressure point in their palm while cutting. Still, it's a decent choice if you like a traditional handle and aren't ready to invest in the Wüsthof.

CURVED-BLADE TROUBLE

Zyliss Control 8-inch

$48 for a three-knife set

This knife, currently available only as part of a three-knife bundle, seems to encourage poor technique. A flat divot atop the handle provides a place to rest your thumb or index finger while cutting. Problem is, that's the wrong way to hold a knife. You should use a pinch grip or standard grip instead (see "The Safer Way to Hold a Knife," on page 50). Even worse, the curved blade makes straight, clean cuts more difficult.

FOR SMALLER HANDS

Mac Professional Series 8-inch

$175

Drawing design elements from German and Japanese cutlery, the Mac features a full-tang design with a thinner, dimpled blade meant to release food easily. The thin, very sharp blade, while nice for finely mincing herbs, feels almost brittle when cutting through sweet potatoes or chicken—and may be best suited to users with small hands. Some panelists complained of cramping and an uncomfortable and slippery handle.

LOOKS GOOD BUT SLICES POORLY

Keemake Professional 8-inch

$40

The Keemake is a beautiful knife with a wood veneer handle, and it can be had for a song. But it received some of the worst marks from our panelists for comfort. They also found force transmission to be downright lousy. The blade is sharp, but because the knife is unwieldy, cutting is still difficult.

The only 3 knives you really need

MANUFACTURERS LOVE to bundle stuff you don't need with must-have items. And it's easy to be dazzled by those big 12-piece knife sets in their handsome maple blocks. But most of those sets are a waste of money, designed for a different era and filled with knives you'll rarely use. A carving knife, for example, once an essential tool for slicing your Sunday roast, will probably emerge from the block only around the holidays. And even then, it's just as easy to carve a turkey with a chef's knife. Here's all you really need.

1 A GREAT CHEF'S KNIFE

"A good chef's knife will cut about 95 percent of everything you need to cut in a kitchen," says Branden Lewis, a chef. "You're far better off putting your entire budget into one great chef's knife as opposed to blowing it on a big, mediocre set." A recent CR study supports his thinking: Participants said they use their chef's knives for everything from mincing herbs and slicing veggies to dicing tofu and even deboning and spatchcocking chicken. (Less than $20 to $200 and up.)

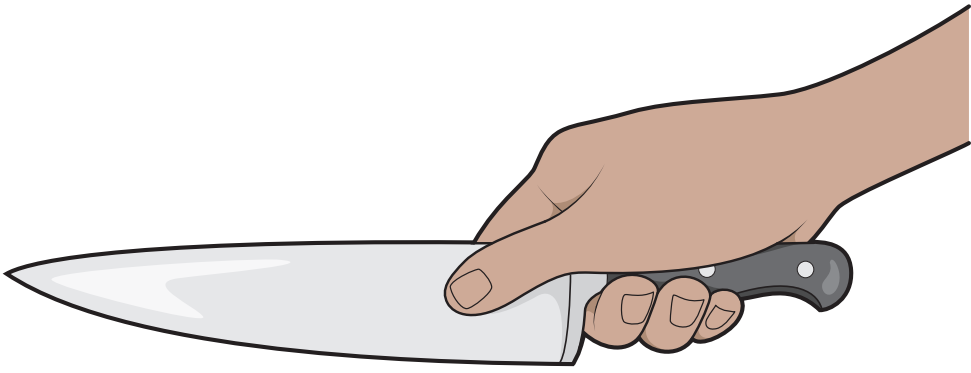
2 A SERRATED BREAD KNIFE

"The 5 percent of foods you can't cut with a chef's knife can be cut with a bread knife," Lewis says. Serrated or scalloped teeth can slice through delicate foods without exerting too much downward force to crush them. Among the foods that benefit from such treatment are crusty baguettes, soft loaves of white bread, and tomatoes. The Henckels Forged Premio ($35) and Wüsthof Classic 8-inch ($135) bread knives are solid choices that match two of our favorite chef's knives. ($5 to $60 and up.)

3 A SMALL PARING KNIFE

Though not essential, a 3- to 4-inch paring knife can be nice for small, fine tasks like cutting strawberries in half. ($7 to $95.)

HOW TO USE A KNIFE



The Consumer Product Safety Commission staff reports that an estimated 435,000 adults landed in an emergency room as a result of a cutlery mishap between 2016 and 2020. With the right cutting technique and the best sharpening and cleaning practices, you can significantly reduce that risk. And it will reduce your food prep time, making cooking so much easier.

THE SAFER WAY TO HOLD A KNIFE

Holding your chef's knife the right way maximizes control, improves speed, and minimizes the likelihood that you'll cut yourself.

THE PINCH GRIP The best approach is to use what professional chefs call a pinch or pincer grip, which provides the perfect blend of control and leverage. "Choke up on the knife so you're pinching the blade between your thumb and index finger," says Branden Lewis, a professor of culinary arts at Johnson & Wales University. "And your last three fingers are wrapped around the handle." Your index finger will be bent, not extended, next to the blade, and you should be pinching the blade just above the handle where it meets the blade.

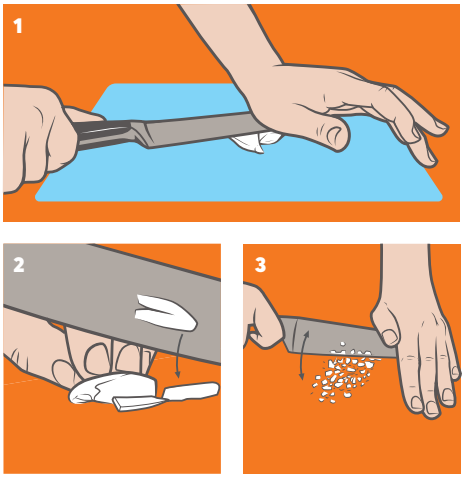
THE STANDARD GRIP If the pinch grip feels unnatural or unstable even with practice, try the so-called standard grip instead, where you wrap all five fingers around the handle. If a knife still feels unwieldy, consider downsizing from the standard 8-inch knife to a 6- or 7-inch one.

CONTROL YOUR DIGITS Never place your thumb or index finger on the back of the blade or on top of the handle, because it will cause you to lose some control. If you feel you need a finger to push the blade through food, it probably means your knife is overdue for sharpening.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY T.M. DETWILER (BELOW), BROWN BIRD DESIGN (ABOVE AND FACING PAGE)

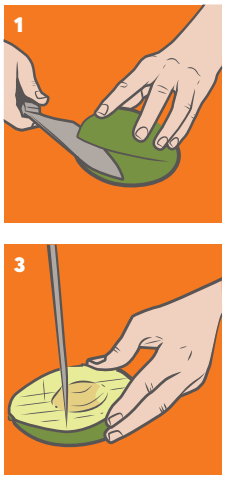
THE BEST CUTTING TECHNIQUE

Holding the knife correctly in your dominant hand, your nondominant hand should safely position foods as you cut. Curl your fingers so the tips are gripping the food and the portion of your fingers between the top and middle joints are parallel to the blade, with thumb and pinky tucked out of the way. That way, the blade's side simply rubs the flat portion of your fingers.



HOW TO CHOP GARLIC

1. On a cutting board, lay your chef's knife flat over a clove of garlic (peel on) and smash down with your other hand to break off the skin and flatten the clove. **2.** Slice across the entire flattened clove to get the pieces smaller. **3.** Rock your knife over the garlic until it's finely minced, with your nondominant hand on the back edge of the knife.



KEEP YOUR KNIFE SHARP

A sharp knife makes cutting not only easier but also safer. "With a dull knife, you're forced to exert more pressure, making it more likely that the knife will slip, leaving you prone to injury," Lewis says. If your knife feels dull, first try what's called "honing": Run the blade along a honing steel at the angle specified by the manufacturer. The sharp edge is fairly thin and can bend or curl in one direction over time. Honing can straighten it without grinding away a lot of metal to create a sharp edge. If honing doesn't do the trick, turn to sharpening using one of these tools.

MANUAL $5-$60

These handheld sharpeners have slots for guiding the blade. You start at the blade's base and pull through in one steady motion.
PROS: Easiest for beginners to use.
CONS: Relatively slow. (But that's not a problem if, as we recommend, you have only one or two high-quality knives to sharpen.)

BEST MANUAL SHARPENER
Chef's Choice Model 4643 $60

ELECTRIC $20-$210

These devices sit on a countertop and have grooves for holding your knife at the correct angle as you drag it through.
PROS: Speedy; easy for beginners.
CONS: The sound of grinding metal can be a little intimidating at first, and if you don't pull the blade through smoothly and quickly, it can wear down too much in one spot.

BEST ELECTRIC SHARPENER
Chef's Choice Model 15XV 3-Stage $180

WHETSTONE $10-$90 and up

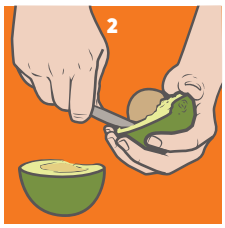
After soaking the stone in water for about 10 minutes, you drag your knife across it at a precise angle, taking care to do the same number of strokes on each side of the blade.
PROS: Can deliver superior sharpness. A tool called a bevel gauge (sold at hardware stores) can help you find the right angle.
CONS: Requires practice to do it correctly.

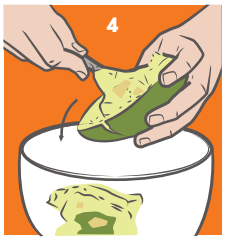
BEST WHETSTONE
Sharp Pebble Premium Whetstone $40

Treat your knife right

CLEANING YOUR KNIFE
Always clean it by hand. In a dishwasher, blades can easily bang into other items and get nicked. The very hot water and drying can wreak havoc on handles. And it's easy to cut yourself when pulling sharp knives from a tightly packed dishwasher. To wash by hand safely, hold your knife securely at the handle with the blade's tip facing away from you, fold the soft side of a soapy sponge across the blade, and push from base to tip.

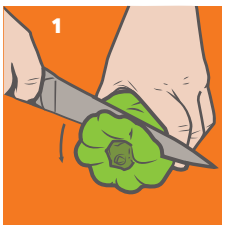
STORING YOUR KNIFE
Wood blocks and wall-mounted magnetic strips are both fine for storage. If you want your knives out of sight, consider a block designed to fit inside a kitchen drawer. Or if you're going to store them in a drawer with other kitchen tools, buy protective plastic sleeves made specifically for chef's knives. (The cardboard holder your knife came in is meant only for temporary use.)

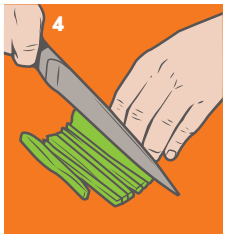




HOW TO SLICE AN AVOCADO

1. With the avocado on its side on a cutting board, make one long cut around the perimeter. **2.** Pick up the avocado, twist to separate the two halves, and use a spoon to remove the pit. **3.** Hold the avocado on the board with one hand while making cuts through the flesh to the peel, criss-crossing the cuts to form diamond-shaped pieces. The hand holding the avocado should never be directly under the knife. **4.** Hold the avocado in your hand and use a spoon to scoop out the diced flesh.





HOW TO CUT UP A BELL PEPPER

1. Cut off the top and bottom of the pepper about a half-inch from the ends. **2.** Stand the pepper upright and use the knife's tip to cut a small slit through the flesh on one side. Don't go deep enough to reach the seeds. **3.** Unscroll and flatten the pepper, and lay it exterior side down on a cutting board. Remove the cluster of seeds and trim away the white residue. Shake off any remaining seeds. **4.** With the exterior side facing the board, slice the flattened pepper into half-inch strips.

CHOP ON THIS

With the perfect knife in hand, you need the right cutting board to use it on—two, in fact, one for meat and one for everything else. "Raw meat and seafood can carry harmful bacteria, so have a cutting board just for them," says Sana Mujahid, PhD, manager of food safety testing and research at CR.

Is plastic safer than wood?

NOT NECESSARILY. Either can be used for cutting raw meat and then disinfected. But plastic does have an advantage: The easiest way to sanitize a cutting board is with the high-heat cycle of a dishwasher, and wood boards are generally not dishwasher-safe. (You can sanitize wood boards by soaking them in a gallon of water treated with a tablespoon of bleach.)

Looks aside, the biggest difference between wood species is hardness. Firmer woods like hickory dull a knife more quickly and offer a less satisfying "grip" as you cut. Softer woods like teak or maple provide a better grip but get more unsightly gouges, which harbor bacteria. If your wood board starts to look weathered, you can sand it down and reseal it with mineral oil.

PLASTIC CUTTING BOARDS

BEST PLASTIC BOARDS

Original Gorilla Grip Cutting Board

$24 for a set of three

These stay sturdy on countertops. Their surface has enough "give" to provide grip but is firm enough to resist gouges. Each has two usable sides, one with a groove around the perimeter to catch liquids and the other flat so you can scrape food directly into a bowl. And they're dishwasher-safe.

STURDY & REVERSIBLE

Oxo Cutting Boards

$24 for a set of two

Like the Gorilla Grip boards, these are sturdy, reversible, and dishwasher-safe, and provide just the right amount of hardness beneath a knife to offer grip without gouges. The lone drawback is size. At only 7.25x10.75 inches and 9x12.9 inches, neither is big enough to easily prep for a large crowd.

BUDGET PLASTIC MATS

Carrollar Flexible Plastic Cutting Board Mats

$10 for a set of four

These cutting mats are flexible, so you can curl them into a funnel-like shape to slide chopped ingredients into a pan or bowl. Each has a food icon (cow, fish, chicken, tomato) to help avoid cross contamination. They slip a bit on counters, so you may also want a sturdier board for heavier tasks.

WOOD CUTTING BOARDS

BEST WOOD BOARD

TeakHaus Traditional Edge Grain Collection Professional Cutting Board

$100 and up

Though not very practical for routine kitchen prep, this massive board is a beauty and feels great under your knife. The size and look also make it perfect as a serving board. Its sheer heft makes it hard to clean thoroughly at the sink, so avoid using it for meat.

BUDGET WOOD BOARD

John Boos 16" Maple Edge Grain Chop-N-Slice Reversible Cutting Board

$46 and up

Simple but effective, this board provides good knife feedback and is big enough for most tasks. (It comes in larger sizes and with a groove for catching liquids.) It must be hand-washed and periodically resealed with mineral oil you can buy online or at a housewares store.

FOR SERVING ONLY

Totally Bamboo Bamboo Cutting Boards

$18 for a set of three

This trio of boards is best not for cutting on but for serving cheese or sliced veggies. The smooth surfaces slip on countertops and the bamboo is very hard, so you feel like you're damaging your knife with each cut. These, too, are hand-wash-only and need periodic resealing with mineral oil.

PHOTOS: PAUL HOPE/CONSUMER REPORTS

ROAD REPORT

NEWS & EXPERT ADVICE TO KEEP YOU AHEAD OF THE CURVE™

MONEY SAVER

What color car is the best for resale?

If you like yellow, go for it. While most new-car purchasers choose white, black, gray, or silver, a new study from iSeeCars.com suggests buyers might choose neutral colors because they wrongly believe that's what the next buyer will prefer. The study, which analyzed sales data from more than 650,000 vehicles from the 2019 model year, found more eye-catching colors—especially yellow—held their value better. Often, colorful cars are sporty or have more expensive trim packages—a notable factor.

ASK OUR EXPERTS

If a neighbor's tree falls on my car, who's responsible?

Unfortunately, you are in most circumstances. As would be the case if a neighbor's tree fell on your home's roof, it is your responsibility to make an insurance claim, says Loretta Worters, a spokesperson for the Insurance Information Institute. **Such car damage is covered** under the comprehensive portion of your car insurance, minus the deductible—if you have comprehensive. With hurricane season upon us, now may be a good time to raise your concerns with your neighbors if they have trees that look unhealthy.

THE VITAL STATISTIC

16%

The amount your car is likely to have appreciated in the last year. Its value has grown even more—51 percent—since the start of 2020. New-car prices haven't seen as dramatic an increase. There may be an advantage to selling your car for a new one.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

RECALL

Ford

Ford is recalling almost 3 million cars and SUVs, including 2013-2019 Escape SUVs, 2013-2018 C-Max hybrids, 2013-2016 Fusion sedans, 2013-2021 Transit Connect vans, and 2015-2018 Edge SUVs because they may roll away even if they appear to be in Park. The problem is due to a bushing that may degrade or detach.

WHAT TO DO: Ford dealerships will replace the bushing and add a protective cap, free of charge. For more information, contact Ford Motor Company at 866-436-7332.

FIRST DRIVE

Acura Integra

PHOTO: ACURA

Acura resurrected the Integra name for its entry-level model, succeeding the ILX. It has the same 200-hp, 1.5-liter turbo four-cylinder engine as the Honda Civic Si and comes standard with a continuously variable transmission (CVT); a six-speed manual is optional. Key active safety features are standard, including automatic emergency braking.

CR'S TAKE: We like the sporty, yet fuel-efficient powertrain, and it's a relief the Integra has the Civic's easy controls. The slick-shifting manual makes the car more fun than the CVT.

BASE PRICE RANGE $30,800-$35,800
DESTINATION CHARGE $1,095
PRICE AS DRIVEN $34,395

ILLUSTRATIONS BY KIERSTEN ESSENPREIS

THE 9 EASIEST CARS TO DRIVE

These models top our ratings in how effortless they are to use in your everyday life. Think comfy seats, straightforward controls, and good visibility.

by Benjamin Preston

WHAT MAKES A VEHICLE HASSLE-FREE

QUICK-READ GAUGES

The speedometer, fuel gauge, and other information displays are simple to read and understand.

UNCOMPLICATED CONTROLS

Physical knobs and buttons tend to make more sense than fussy digital menus.

MORE RELIABLE

Nothing causes stress like a car that's constantly in the shop for repairs.

EASY ACCESS

Vehicles with hip-height seats and wide door openings are less difficult to enter and exit.

NICE DRIVER POSITIONING

An ergonomic driving position reduces fatigue over time, making the journey more enjoyable.

COMFORTABLE SEATS
Supportive padding, multiple adjustments, and adequate legroom provide the most pleasant seating.
GOOD VISIBILITY
Unobstructed outward views make a car easier to drive. Large windows and thin roof pillars help.
RAV4 PRIME
SMOOTH RIDE
The best suspension systems soak up bumps nicely and keep occupant-jostling to a minimum.
QUIET INTERIOR
Excessive tire and wind noise can be irritating. Adequate soundproofing allows greater tranquility.

PHOTO: JOHN POWERS/CONSUMER REPORTS

NANCY WILLIAMS, a retired public school administrative assistant, says she has always considered her vehicle as "simply a way to get me from here to there." That is, until she leased her first Subaru Forester, with its wide windows, comfortable seats, and simple controls. "It's the perfect size," says the 74-year-old, who lives in Lexington, Ky. "The GPS screen is large and easy to follow, and you can pack a couple of kids in there."

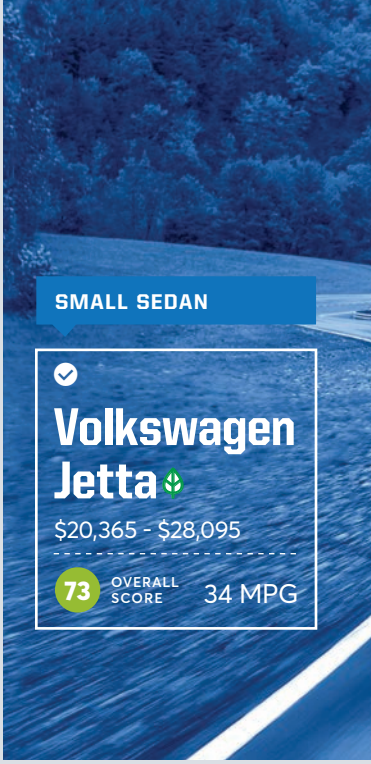
With its unique body design, the Forester is small enough to navigate crowded parking lots but big enough to hold large plants from the nearby Lowe's, Williams says. "It feels heavy when you drive. It's not a dinky little car."

When the lease on her 2018 model was up, she signed a new one for a 2021 version, which is slightly wider and comes with safety features she likes, such as automatic emergency braking (AEB).

With shoppers like Williams in mind, we used our test data to identify CR-recommended vehicles that are the easiest to drive, including the Forester. We looked for vehicles with the highest scores in nine variables. (See the previous pages.) These autos boast smooth rides, easy access, uncomplicated infotainment systems, and unobstructed views, among other stress-reducing attributes.

Many of the models are sedans in the $35,000 range. No trucks and just one large SUV made our list, because those bigger vehicles can be difficult to get in and out of and are trickier to maneuver and park. You also won't see any luxury cars, because many have complicated infotainment systems and are prone to technical problems, such as software glitches. The models here offer standard forward collision warning (FCW) and AEB with pedestrian detection.

As CR-recommended vehicles, they have strong reliability, owner satisfaction, and road-test scores. They're arranged by category and then by the price of the entry-level trim.



SMALL SEDAN

Volkswagen Jetta

$20,365 - $28,095

73 OVERALL SCORE 34 MPG

WITH ITS COMFORTABLE front and rear seats, good outward visibility, and quiet cabin, Volkswagen's affordable, fuel-efficient compact sedan proved easy to drive for CR's testers. Wide door openings make the Jetta easy to access, and its controls make sense and won't leave you scratching your head. The

MIDSIZED SEDAN

Subaru Legacy

$23,495 - $36,695

87 OVERALL SCORE 28 MPG

THE LEGACY SEDAN is a perennial favorite among CR testers, not least because it offers the sort of smooth ride, quiet cabin, and desirable features often seen in luxury cars that cost a lot more money. The Legacy also delivers the best ride comfort of any midsized sedan we've tested, and even eclipsed much more expensive sedans, such as the Mercedes-Benz E-Class and the Lexus LS, in the ride comfort category. Slim roof pillars allow excellent outward visibility, and the Legacy's driver's seat area can accommodate people of various sizes. Regardless of the trim, generously padded armrests add to the driver's comfort. The Premium trim includes supportive leather seats and a power-adjustable driver's seat, and the more basic cloth seats offered in the lower trims are comfortable, too. Heated and ventilated front seats are available and add a bit of extra comfort during inclement weather.

WORSE — BETTER | RECOMMENDED | GREEN CHOICE

suspension system provides a soft, pleasant ride. The driving position is good for visibility and comfort, with plenty of headroom, and the front seats offer ample legroom. The rear seats have comfortable cushions, and because the Jetta is longer than most of its competitors, it has plenty of rear-seat legroom and a large trunk. As an added stress-relieving bonus, all trim levels of the Jetta come standard with blind spot warning (BSW) and rear cross traffic warning (RCTW). Child car seats are fairly easy to install, although three car seats are not likely to fit next to one another across the back seat.

MIDSIZED SEDAN

Kia K5

$23,790 - $31,190

76 OVERALL SCORE

32 MPG

A ROOMY SEDAN, the K5 has slim roof pillars and long side windows that offer excellent outward visibility. CR testers liked the raised lip on top of the interior door panel that makes it easier to close the doors from inside the car. Higher trim levels—including the all-wheel-drive LXS—come with the most comfortable driver's seat, although the GT-Line and EX trims come with larger wheels and lower-profile tires that can make the ride less smooth. The rear seats have plenty of room for passengers of all sizes. The cabin layout is fairly conventional, and the K5's traditional gear selector, gauges, and controls are logically placed and easy to use. Buyers are rewarded for choosing a lower trim level by getting the smaller 8-inch infotainment screen, which comes with wireless Android Auto and Apple CarPlay; the larger screen doesn't. All trims also get dual-zone climate control with three levels of automatic fan speed—a feature you don't realize you need until you have it. BSW is standard on all trims but the base level.

MIDSIZED SEDAN

Toyota Camry Hybrid

$27,980 - $33,420

86 OVERALL SCORE

47 MPG

THE CAMRY is a longtime stalwart among sedans. CR testers found that the hybrid version, with its quieter powertrain and outstanding fuel economy, is the one to spring for when looking for a car that's easy to drive and to live with. Like all Camry models, it features a comfortable driver's seat with multiple adjustments, easy-to-use controls, and a smooth, quiet ride that soaks up most bumps. Slim A-pillars and simple styling allow for big windows and great visibility compared with many other sedans. The hybrid comes standard with automatic climate control, and its cargo area doesn't make any sacrifices on account of the large hybrid battery sitting beneath the trunk. The Hybrid's list of standard active safety features includes low-light pedestrian detection, daytime cyclist detection, lane departure warning (LDW), and lane keeping assistance (LKA). Rear-seat-reminder systems come standard on all trim levels.

PHOTOS: VOLKSWAGEN; JOHN POWERS/CONSUMER REPORTS; SUBARU; TOYOTA

SMALL SUV

Subaru Forester

$25,895 - $35,995

90 OVERALL SCORE 28 MPG

AS IN YEARS PAST, the Forester is a no-nonsense utilitarian vehicle that has a roomy interior, a smooth ride, and good fuel economy. Large door openings provide easy access. An upright driving position, combined with tall windows, makes for easy outward visibility. The Premium trim includes single-zone automatic climate control, and the All-Weather package adds heated front seats and side mirrors. Unlike other Subaru models, the Forester has a simple infotainment system, with physical buttons and knobs that make the climate controls easier to use. LDW, LKA, and adaptive cruise control (ACC) come standard on all trims.

MIDSIZED 2-ROW SUV

Subaru Outback

$27,645 - $40,645

85 OVERALL SCORE 24 MPG

WITH ITS SLIGHTLY ELEVATED ride height and upright driving position, the Outback has most of the benefits of an SUV in an easier-to-manage, not-quite-SUV package. It outshines similar SUVs in terms of ride and handling but still offers strong light-duty off-road capability. Outward visibility is excellent, and the interior is roomy, with lots of cargo space—especially with the back seats folded down. Both front and rear doors offer good access to the seats, which are supple and supportive. The Outback has a quieter cabin than the taller, slightly smaller Forester, and its roof rack crossbars swivel easily to the side when not in use to further reduce wind noise at highway speeds. Like the Forester, the Outback comes standard with LDW, LKA, and ACC. BSW, RCTW, and rear automatic braking are optional.

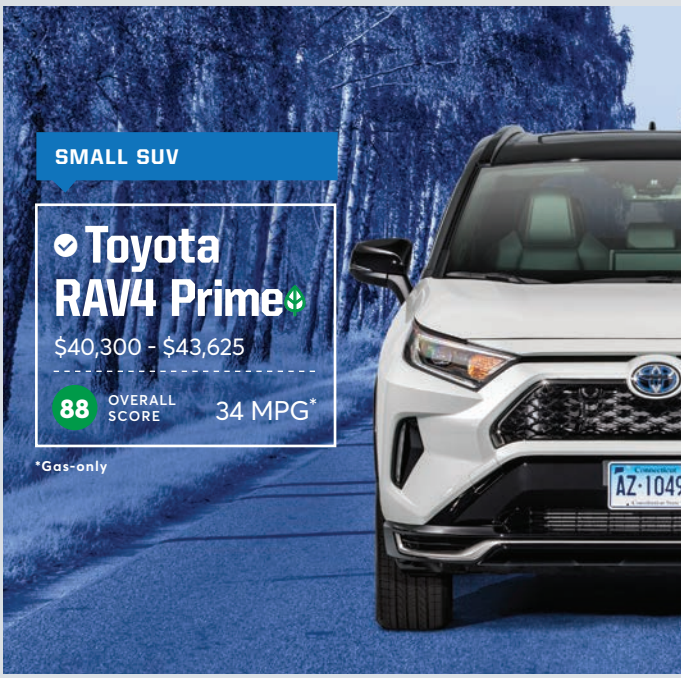
SMALL SUV

Toyota RAV4 Prime

$40,300 - $43,625

88 OVERALL SCORE 34 MPG*

*Gas-only



THE PLUG-IN HYBRID version of the RAV4 has a smoother, more comfortable ride than its gasoline-only and conventional hybrid (non-plug-in) counterparts, possibly because of the greater weight of its plug-in hybrid battery pack. When running in its electric-only mode—the driver can decide when to use its 42-mile EV range—the RAV4 Prime is quiet. Hybrid mode is quiet, too; electric assist keeps engine revs low. The Prime's interior is a little nicer than other versions of

PHOTOS: SUBARU(2); CHEVROLET; JOHN POWERS/CONSUMER REPORTS; HONDA

the RAV4, with more soft-touch surfaces throughout. Drivers of all sizes will benefit from ample legroom and an upright seating position that aids outward visibility. The controls are easy to use, thanks to large knobs and physical buttons.

MIDSIZED 3-ROW SUV

Chevrolet Traverse

$33,920 - $53,600

83 OVERALL SCORE — 20 MPG

OF ALL THE THREE-ROW SUVs CR has tested, the Traverse is the easiest to drive. It has all the attributes of a hassle-free car. Large front and rear doors offer painless access to a quiet, cavernous interior, and even though the roof pillars are rather wide, outward visibility is very good due to large windows. An optional surround-view camera system makes visibility while backing up even better, aiding maneuverability, and the third-row headrests flip down for unobstructed rear views. A long wheelbase lends itself to a smooth ride. Inside, the controls are logically arranged and easy to use, and a built-in WiFi hot spot and multiple USB charging ports will appeal to families with multiple devices to charge and connect. Access to the third row is uncomplicated. All-wheel drive is an optional feature.

MINIVAN

Honda Odyssey

$37,340 - $49,470

79 OVERALL SCORE — 22 MPG

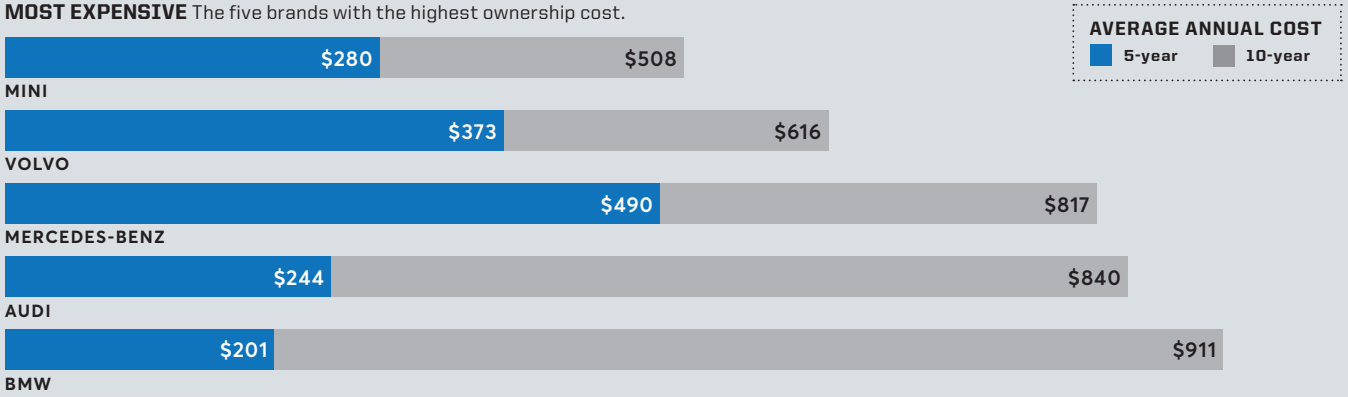
SUVS AND PICKUP TRUCKS may be more popular, but minivans have long provided a level of practical versatility that can't be beat. The Odyssey, with its huge interior, flexible seating, smooth ride, and prolific child car-seat anchoring options, is the easiest to drive and enjoy among this dwindling breed of family hauler. An elevated driving position and large windows create great outward visibility, and a standard multi-angle backup camera makes it even better. A low floor, tall roof, and big doors allow easy front-seat access. Large sliding doors on both sides make second-row access even better. LKA, road departure mitigation, and ACC are standard on all trims.

Brands That Cost Less to Own

The least (and most) expensive car brands to maintain and repair at five and 10 years, based on data collected from CR members.

LEAST EXPENSIVE The five brands with the lowest ownership cost.

MOST EXPENSIVE The five brands with the highest ownership cost.



THE PRICE YOU pay to buy a car is only the beginning of what it can ultimately cost you. A CR analysis shows that, on average, members spent $208 a year for repairs and maintenance on a car that is five years old. That number nearly doubled, to $406, on a 10-year-old model.

Annual ownership costs can vary significantly by brand. For instance, at the 10-year mark, on average, Cadillac owners spend the least ($225) while BMW owners spend the most ($911). Several domestic brands are among the cheapest to maintain, including upscale autos from Buick and Lincoln (the sixth least expensive). CR experts say that the large production volume and lower parts and labor costs are the main reasons that many U.S. luxury brands are less expensive to maintain than premium European models.

"Depending on the brand, maintenance costs can add up significantly over time," says John Ibbotson, CR's chief mechanic. "Knowing how much others have paid in ownership costs can help you determine whether a new or used car is within your budget."

The charts above show the five brands with the lowest and highest maintenance and repair costs over a 12-month period, from among 26 brands included in the analysis. See the full list at **CR.org/ownershipcosts.**

ILLUSTRATIONS BY KIERSTEN ESSENPREIS

ROAD TEST

EXCLUSIVE RATINGS & REVIEWS
BASED ON TESTING AT CR'S
327-ACRE AUTO TEST CENTER

SMALL SUVs

Mazda CX-50

Sharp Handling and a Classy Cabin

83
OVERALL SCORE

ROAD-TEST SCORE 79

HIGHS Handling, steering, fit and finish, interior room

LOWS Ride, modest acceleration with the base engine, controls

POWERTRAIN 187-hp, 2.5-liter 4-cylinder engine; 6-speed automatic transmission; all-wheel drive

FUEL 24 mpg on regular

PRICE $26,800-$41,550 base price + $1,225 destination charge
Total MSRP as tested $38,620

MAZDA MIGHT LIKE buyers to think of the CX-50 as an alternative to the Ford Bronco Sport or Subaru Outback. We say ignore the marketing hype about off-road excursions and instead focus on the CX-50's sporty on-road handling and upscale cabin. It's a bit larger than Mazda's CX-5, with more cargo space yet slightly less overall passenger space. Handling is sharper than the CX-5, but the ride is stiffer.

The CX-50 shines on twisty two-lanes, taking on corners like a Jaguar or Porsche SUV. It has responsive steering and taut suspension, giving it a sportier driving feel than most rivals. But ride quality suffers, in part due to our tested model's 20-inch wheels—lower trims come with more rational 17s. With the bigger wheels, large bumps can send big impacts into the cabin.

Power is adequate from the standard 187-hp four-cylinder. The engine is paired to a six-speed automatic, at a time when most transmissions have at least eight speeds. Although the transmission responds quickly when needed, downshifts can be a bit rough.

Our tested Premium Plus model has an understated upscale feel, with lots of padded surfaces and precise-feeling knobs and buttons. The front seats are supportive and comfortable, and the rear seat has plenty of space, too.

But the infotainment system is frustrating to use while driving. Even simple radio operation tasks require multiple taps and twists of the rotary controller knob. You can use the touch screen with Android Auto and Apple CarPlay, but it is too far away from the driver to be useful.

FCW, AEB with pedestrian and cyclist detection, BSW, RCTW, LDW, and LKA all come standard.

SPORTY CARS

Subaru WRX

Stiff and Loud, but Really Fast

64
OVERALL SCORE

ROAD-TEST SCORE 83

HIGHS Acceleration, handling agility, braking

LOWS Stiff ride, noisy cabin, slow-responding infotainment screen

POWERTRAIN 271-hp, 2.4-liter turbocharged 4-cylinder engine; 6-speed manual transmission; all-wheel drive

FUEL 25 mpg on premium

PRICE $29,605-$42,395 base price + $995 destination charge
Total MSRP as tested $33,227

THE REDESIGNED WRX sticks close to the rally car-inspired formula it established 20 years ago, giving drivers a four-door sedan with a powerful turbocharged engine, road-hugging suspension, and all-wheel drive. It's a blast to drive, but Subaru's focus on performance comes at the expense of everyday ride quality and cabin comfort.

For 2022, Subaru swapped the previous 2.0-liter turbo four-cylinder for a 2.4-liter that delivers essentially the same peak power. It's a mighty quick car, as long as you keep the engine spinning between 3,000 and 6,000 rpm. That's okay by us—we enjoy the six-speed manual's robust and accurate feel.

Handling is the WRX's greatest virtue. It posted one of the highest speeds through our avoidance maneuver—a test that simulates swerving quickly to avoid a vehicle or an obstacle on the road. The taut suspension gives the WRX a keen ability to gobble up curvy back roads, while the all-wheel drive puts the power down like a cat on Velcro.

But the WRX isn't a friendly companion on long journeys. The front seats are short on adjustments and comfort, and there's too much road and engine noise, making for a loud and tiring experience. Underlying it all is a super-stiff ride that becomes a punishment when the twisty road ends. We also don't like the slow-responding infotainment screen, or that some simple climate functions require multiple steps.

FCW and AEB with pedestrian detection aren't available with the manual transmission, a limitation some performance cars avoid. Getting them requires opting for the continuously variable transmission instead.

PHOTOS: JOHN POWERS/CONSUMER REPORTS

Safety Term Glossary: AEB automatic emergency braking; **BSW** blind spot warning; **FCW** forward collision warning; **LDW** lane departure warning; **LKA** lane keeping assistance; **RCTW** rear cross traffic warning.

LUXURY COMPACT SUVs

Lexus NX350h

Improved Drivability, Great MPG

83
OVERALL SCORE

ROAD-TEST SCORE 80

HIGHS Fuel economy, fit and finish

LOWS Visibility, annoying electronic door releases, touchy brake pedal, long stops

POWERTRAIN 240-hp, 2.5-liter 4-cylinder hybrid engine; continuously variable transmission; all-wheel drive

FUEL 38 mpg on premium

PRICE $41,550-$57,400 base price + $1,075 destination charge
Total MSRP as tested $47,590

THE HYBRID VERSION of the NX doesn't bring the Lexus any closer to its prime competitors—the Audi Q5 and BMW X3—in terms of driving enjoyment than the gas-only model we featured in July. But the NX350h does deliver a dramatic improvement in fuel economy, at 38 mpg overall, and it feels more refined during normal, non-sporty driving. On balance, the hybrid version of the NX is the better choice.

We enjoy the NX hybrid's initial shove of electric power off the line, and it transitions smoothly back and forth between gas and electric power. When pushed, the engine wakes up with an unpleasant "vroom," and the continuously variable transmission can cause the engine to rev quite high during acceleration, a quirk known as rubberbanding. Stopping distances were also over 10 feet longer for the hybrid, and the brake pedal is touchy at low speeds.

In other respects, the two NXs are practically the same. Quick steering makes the SUV feel responsive in corners, and the ride soaks up bumps nicely. The front seats are plush, with ample side bolstering. Rear-seat legroom is tight for taller occupants, and the NX's cargo space is modest compared with rivals. Small windows and thick roof pillars compromise views, particularly to the rear.

The infotainment system consolidates media and climate into a single touch screen. We don't like that some common tasks require multiple steps. The electronic interior door releases are hard to find at night.

FCW, AEB with pedestrian detection, BSW, RCTW, LDW, LKA, and adaptive cruise control all come standard.

SMALL PICKUP TRUCKS

Ford Maverick Hybrid

Outstanding Fuel Economy for a Truck

76
OVERALL SCORE

ROAD-TEST SCORE 82

HIGHS Fuel economy, visibility, access, controls, short stops on dry pavement

LOWS Cabin quality

POWERTRAIN 191-hp, 2.5-liter 4-cylinder hybrid engine; continuously variable transmission; front-wheel drive

FUEL 37 mpg on regular

PRICE $19,995-$29,515 base price + $1,495 destination charge
Total MSRP as tested $32,925

WE WERE IMPRESSED with the Maverick when we tested the turbo version earlier this year. The Bronco Sport-based pickup is relatively inexpensive and delivers a more refined ride than traditional trucks, making it a pleasant daily driver. Even with its short, 4.5-foot bed, it's great for weekend yard tasks, such as hauling bags of mulch or making runs to the dump.

The hybrid version we tested this month can do those same basic workhorse tasks, but the powertrain—which combines a four-cylinder engine with electric drive and a continuously variable transmission—registered 37 mpg overall in our tests, making it far more efficient than any other pickup. It's not as quick as the turbo model, but the electric motor gives smooth and robust response at low speeds, and we like that the hybrid eliminates the turbo model's annoying engine vibrations.

The hybrid comes only with front-wheel drive, which might disqualify it as a practical choice in snowy regions. Towing is limited to 2,000 pounds, only half of what's possible with the turbo engine, but its 1,500-pound payload capacity is stout. We were annoyed by the grabbiness of the hybrid's brakes at low speeds, which can make it difficult to stop exactly where you want without adjusting your pressure on the pedal.

The hybrid is a bit quieter than the regular Maverick, thanks to its ability to drive under electric power at low speeds and because our tested Lariat trim's acoustic-glass windshield cuts down on highway wind noise.

FCW and AEB with pedestrian detection come standard, with BSW and RCTW being optional.

Safety Term Glossary: AEB automatic emergency braking; **BSW** blind spot warning; **FCW** forward collision warning; **LDW** lane departure warning; **LKA** lane keeping assistance; **RCTW** rear cross traffic warning.

Ratings › **Hybrid Options** The Maverick and NX hybrids are improvements over their gas-only versions. The CX-50 is an athletic SUV, while the WRX is unrefined fun.

Make + Model	Overall Score	Survey Results		Road-Test Results												Active Safety Features			
		Predicted reliability	Owner satisfaction	Road-test score	Overall mpg	Seat comfort Front/rear	Usability	Noise	Ride	Fit + finish	Routine handling	Avoidance-maneuver speed, mph	Acceleration, 0-60 mph, sec.	Dry braking, 60-0 mph, ft.	Suitcases + duffels/ Cargo volume, cu. ft.	FCW	AEB, pedestrian	AEB, highway	BSW
SUVs $25,000-$35,000																			
✓ **Subaru Forester** 2.5L	90	^	^	90	28	^ / ^^	^^	–	^	^	^	53.0	9.2	130	36.5	S	S	S	O
✓ **Hyundai Tucson** 2.5L	89	^^	^^	86	26	^ / ^^	^^	^	^	^	^	53.0	9.6	130	38.5	S	S	O	S
✓ **Honda CR-V** 1.5T	84	^	–	82	28	^ / ^^	^	^	–	^	^	52.0	8.2	137	36.0	S	S	S	O
✓ **Mazda CX-50** 2.5L	83	^	–	79	24	^ / ^	–	^	–	^	^	53.0	9.3	131	34.0	S	S	S	S
✓ **Ford Bronco Sport** 1.5T	82	^^	^^	75	25	^ / ^	^^	–	–	^	^	53.5	8.9	126	30.5	S	S	S	S
✓ **Mazda CX-5** 2.5L	82	^	–	78	24	^ / ^	–	^	^	^	^	54.0	8.6	133	30.5	S	S	S	S
✓ **Kia Sportage** 2.5L	72	–	^	78	25	^ / ^^	^	^	^	^	^	55.5	10.0	134	38.0	S	S	S	O
✓ **Toyota RAV4** 2.5L	65	–	–	72	27	^ / ^	^	v	–	–	^	54.0	8.3	131	30.5	S	S	S	O
Nissan Rogue 1.5T	64	v	–	82	25	^ / ^	^^	^	–	^	^	56.0	9.1	134	36.5	S	S	S	S
Ford Escape 1.5T	55	v	–	73	26	– / ^	^^	–	–	–	^	53.0	8.9	128	30.5	S	S	S	S
2-ROW SUVs $45,000-$55,000																			
✓ **Lexus NX350h** 2.5H	83	^	^	80	38	^ / ^	v	^	^	^^	^	53.0	7.6	138	26.5	S	S	S	S
✓ **Lexus NX350** 2.4T	82	^	^	79	25	^ / ^	v	^	^	^^	^	53.5	7.2	127	26.5	S	S	S	S
✓ **BMW X3** 2.0T	81	–	–	92	24	^^ / ^	–	^^	^	^^	^	50.5	7.7	128	32.0	S	S	O	S
✓ **Audi Q5** 2.0T	79	^	–	83	24	^ / ^	–	^	^	^	^	52.5	6.8	130	27.0	S	S	O	S
✓ **Volvo XC60** 2.0T	78	^	–	79	23	^^ / ^	v	^	–	^^	^	52.0	8.0	124	34.0	S	S	S	S
✓ **Infiniti QX50** 2.0T	72	–	vv	77	22	^ / ^	v	^	–	^^	–	55.5	7.2	129	30.5	S	S	S	S
✓ **Lexus UX250h** 2.0H	71	–	–	71	37	^ / v	–	^	^	^	^	54.0	8.8	137	18.0	S	S	S	S
PICKUP TRUCKS $25,000-$45,000																			
✓ **Ford Maverick** 2.5H	76	–	^	82	37	^ / –	^^	^	–	–	^	51.5	8.3	129	NR	S	S	S	O
✓ **Ford Maverick** 2.0T	74	–	^	78	23	^ / –	^^	–	–	–	^	52.5	7.1	127	NR	S	S	S	O
Hyundai Santa Cruz 2.5T	59	v	^	77	24	^ / –	^^	^	^	^	^	51.5	6.6	132	NR	S	S	O	O
SPORTS CARS $25,000-$45,000																			
✓ **BMW 230i** 2.0T	79	–	^^	85	31	^^ / vv	–	^	–	^	^^	56.0	6.4	128	2+1	S	S	O	S
✓ **Honda Civic Si** 1.5T	72	–	^	74	32	^ / ^	^^	v	v	^	^^	57.5	7.3	134	3+1	S	S	S	O
Volkswagen Golf GTI 2.0T	67	v	^	85	28	^ / –	vv	^	–	^	^^	56.0	6.4	127	1+3	S	S	S	S
Subaru WRX 2.4T	64	v	^	83	25	^ / –	^	v	v	–	^^	59.0	5.8	124	2+2	O	O	O	O

› Digital and All Access members can find the latest, complete ratings at CR.org/cars. When you're ready to buy, configure the vehicle and find the best price in your area by clicking the green "View Pricing Information" button on the model's dedicated page.

HOW WE TEST: Recommended models did well in our **Overall Score,** which factors in **road-test results, predicted reliability, owner satisfaction,** and **advanced safety,** which includes crash-test results and the availability of crash-prevention features, such as forward collision warning, automatic emergency braking, pedestrian detection, and blind spot warning. A dash (–) means no such safety system is offered; O means that it's optional on at least some trim levels; S means that the feature is standard on all trims. We deduct points if a model's gear selector lacks fail-safes to prevent the vehicle from rolling away.

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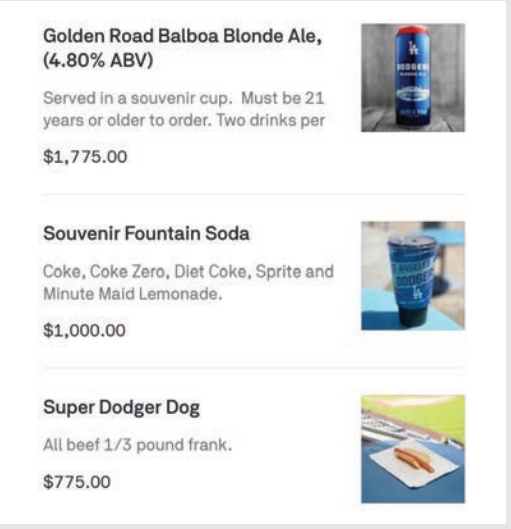
Not-So-Fine Dining

Sometimes it's just easier to eat at home.

We Cry 'Foul' on These Prices

Forget having a budget-friendly outing at this ballpark.

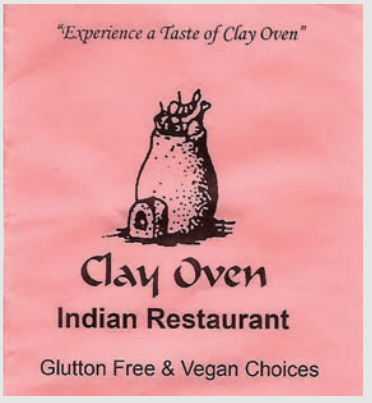
Submitted by Elizabeth Passarelli, via email


Golden Road Balboa Blonde Ale, (4.80% ABV)
Served in a souvenir cup. Must be 21 years or older to order. Two drinks per
$1,775.00
Souvenir Fountain Soda
Coke, Coke Zero, Diet Coke, Sprite and Minute Maid Lemonade.
$1,000.00
Super Dodger Dog
All beef 1/3 pound frank.
$775.00

Don't Bring Your (Big) Appetite

We say skip this place if you're looking for an all-you-can-eat meal.

Submitted by Bill Hamilton, Daly City, CA



Open for Business?

We challenge you to figure out when this eatery is hoping you'll stop by.

Submitted via email, as seen in Dewey Beach, DE

Let's Skip Dessert Tonight

Or maybe try another flavor.

Submitted by Rick Magnani, via email

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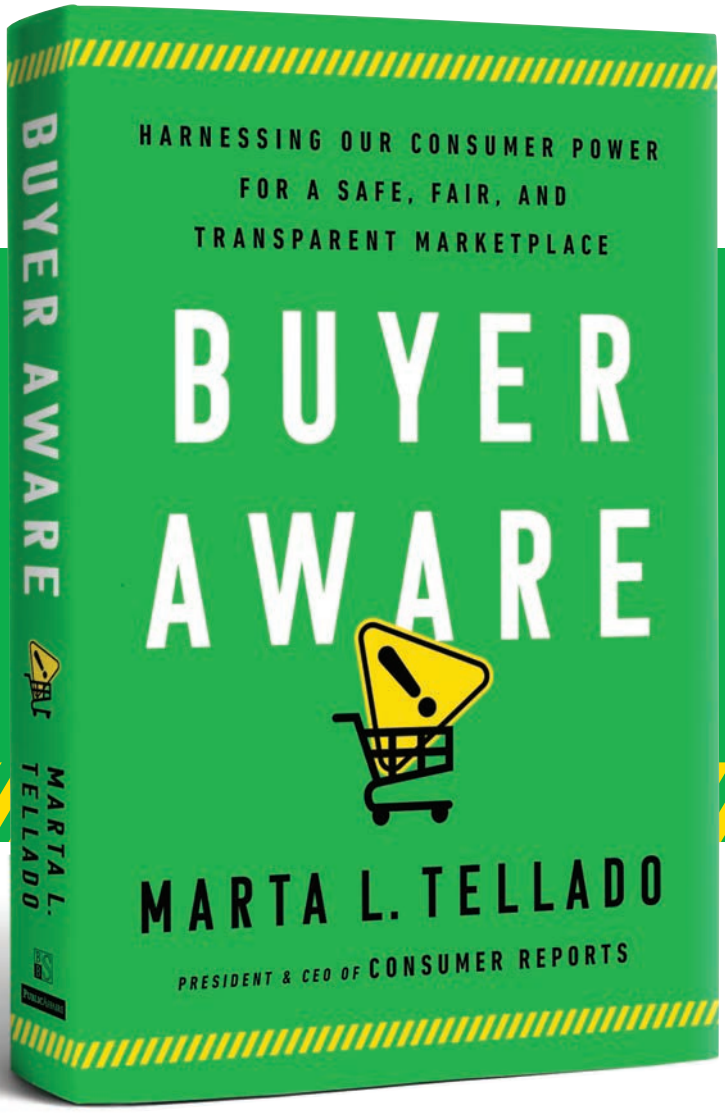
Now get the playbook.



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